

DRAG AGAINST AIDS:  
AIDS AND THE INDIANAPOLIS BAG LADIES, 1981-1995

Kara Elizabeth Chinn

Submitted to the faculty of the Indiana University Graduate School  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree  
Master of Arts  
in the Department of History,  
Indiana University  
April 2020

Accepted by the Graduate Faculty of Indiana University, in partial  
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts.

Master's Thesis Committee

---

Rebecca K. Shrum, Ph.D.  
Chair

---

Jennifer E. Guiliano, Ph.D.

---

Raymond J. Haberski, Jr., Ph.D.



© 2020

Kara Elizabeth Chinn

DRAG AGAINST AIDS: AIDS AND THE INDIANAPOLIS BAG LADIES, 1981-1995

Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS), as it would later be known, began to appear in the United States in 1981. Medical professionals from around the country began to track a mysterious set of illnesses that were affecting previously healthy people, most of who were homosexual men. As the disease spread, it was clear that homosexual men were being most affected. There was no cure to this illness which was quickly killing those infected.

In October 1981, the Indianapolis Bag Ladies, a group of gay men, began as a simple Halloween Bus Tour around the city. Coby Palmer, Gary Johnson, and Ed Walsh teamed up by renting three charter busses for their new “Bag Ladies Bus.” Their campy drag involved multiple costume changes that required them to tote bags around, thus earning their name. By 1982, the Bag Ladies knew they needed to do more than have a party. The second bus tour was all about collecting money and creating a “war chest” for the gay community of Indianapolis in case AIDS made its way to the city. In doing this, they became one of the first grassroots HIV/AIDS support groups in the United States.

After over 38 years of continued efforts, the Indianapolis Bag Ladies have impacted the Indianapolis LGBTQ communities through a variety of programs that expanded beyond the original bus tour. This thesis explores and analyzes these efforts which include Nurse Safe Sexx, a safe sex campaign; the Damien Center, a HIV/AIDS health clinic; and the Buddy House and Buddy Support Program, two programs connecting people with AIDS to support programs. The final chapter of this thesis expands on the discussion through a public program hosted by the Indiana Historical

Society and demonstrates how programs surrounding these topics can be successful for museums and participants.

Rebecca K. Shrum, Ph.D.  
Chair

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction .....	1
Chapter One – Bag Ladies’ Origins .....	8
Chapter Two – Nurse Safe Sexx: AIDS Education and Prevention .....	19
Chapter Three – Buddy Programs: Helping People with AIDS .....	55
Chapter Four – The Damien Center: Religion and AIDS in Indianapolis .....	66
Chapter Five – “Dragtivism” at the Indiana Historical Society .....	76
Conclusion – The Lasting Legacy of the Bag Ladies.....	95
Bibliography .....	98
Curriculum Vitae	

## INTRODUCTION

What would later be named Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS) first emerged in the United States in 1981 among gay men.<sup>1</sup> The virus that causes AIDS, Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), would not be discovered until 1986. The presidency of Ronald Reagan also began in 1981, a triumph of religious and political conservatism that would define much of the 1980s in America. Gay men were blamed for contracting AIDS through their perceived deviant sexual behavior, ostracized from mainstream society, and found few opportunities for financial, medical, political, or personal support from federal or local governments. The AIDS epidemic and its connection to the gay community fostered stigmatized groups that actively fought against hate as well as fought for the lives of people with AIDS. The history of AIDS activism is a core component of AIDS history in the United States.

The earliest cases of AIDS were concentrated in large urban centers like Los Angeles or New York City, where there were vibrant gay communities. Cases of rare illnesses began to be reported in previously healthy homosexual men in the early months of 1981. By early June, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention published their *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* where they described an atypical lung infection, pneumocystis pneumonia, that had infected 5 homosexual men in Los Angeles. This publication became the first official reporting on what would become the AIDS

---

<sup>1</sup> Although this disease was known by many names in the early years, for clarity here it will be described only as AIDS, the name that eventually became standard in July of 1982. Initially, AIDS was recognized as opportunistic pneumonia and Kaposi's Sarcoma; it quickly was relabeled as GRID, Gay Related Immune Deficiency, but this terminology only lasted until July of 1982 when the term AIDS became standard.

epidemic.<sup>2</sup> In July, *The New York Times* reported 41 gay men had been diagnosed with Kaposi's Sarcoma, an uncommon skin cancer, in New York and California.<sup>3</sup> By the end of 1981, 270 cases of this severe immune deficiency had been reported and of those, 121 individuals had died, all gay men.<sup>4</sup>

As the disease spread, it quickly became clear that gay men were not its only victims. By 1982, the Centers for Disease Control had identified four risk groups: homosexuals, hemophiliacs, Haitians, and heroin addicts. The official identification of these risk groups led to further stigmatization as well as the idea that they were to blame for their disease while others were “innocent victims” of this medical condition. This “innocence” was determined by the sexual behavior and lifestyle of each group. Homosexuals and heroin addicts were condemned; their “taboo” lifestyles fell outside of what was considered “normal” [read: heterosexual and non-promiscuous] or “good” [read: non-criminal and cleanly]. People of Haitian origin and those who had recently visited Haiti were vilified because of the belief that AIDS was transmitted physically to the United States through a Haitian link. Hemophiliacs, however, were seen as innocent victims because they contracted AIDS through blood transfusions rather than in any “immoral” way. Although not part of the four original risk groups, children who contracted HIV through their birth mother were labeled as innocent victims as well.

---

<sup>2</sup> “Pneumocystis Pneumonia – Los Angeles,” *CDC Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 30, no. 21 (June 5, 1981): 250-252.

<sup>3</sup> Lawrence K. Altman, “Rare Cancer Seen in 41 Homosexuals,” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), July 3, 1981.

<sup>4</sup> Harry W. Haverkos M.D., and James W. Curran M.D., M.P.H. “The Current Outbreak of Kaposi's Sarcoma and Opportunistic Infections.” *CA: A Cancer Journal for Clinicians* 32: 330-339.

In “The Emerging Histories of AIDS: Three Successive Paradigms,” sociologists Elizabeth Fee and Nancy Krieger argue that during the 1980s, the discourse around AIDS focused on it as a “gay plague.”<sup>5</sup> Despite its emergence in multiple communities, the previously unnamed disease was called Gay Related Immunodeficiency Disease (GRID). This name added to an ongoing and intense discrimination against the gay community. People who already identified homosexuality as a moral and social evil now had a concrete diagnosis to refer to when denouncing homosexual people. Fear of the gay population increased across the United States.<sup>6</sup> The federal government took few positive actions to combat the rising number of AIDS cases. The United States Government took cultural stigma towards AIDS and the LGBT communities as license to do little about the disease. Lack of understanding and information presented by the government stoked the fires of fear by being unclear about how the disease was spread.

AIDS quickly became a nation-wide disease. The State of Indiana reported their first six cases by 1982. Five hundred fifty-nine confirmed cases of AIDS had been reported in Indiana by 1988.<sup>7</sup> By 1994, 3,311 cases had been reported to the State Department of Health.<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>5</sup> Elizabeth Fee and Nancy Krieger, “The Emerging Histories of AIDS: Three Successive Paradigms,” *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences* 15, no. 3 (1993): 460.

<sup>6</sup> Peter Conrad, “The Social Meaning of AIDS,” *Social Policy* 17, no. 1 (Summer 1986): 52.

<sup>7</sup> Bag Ladies Documents, 2006-10 and not dated: AIDS Timeline, M1157, Box 3, Folder 12, Mark A. Lee LGBT Collection, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis.

<sup>8</sup> The Picture: A Needs Assessment and Overview of the Indiana HIV/AIDS Arena (Indianapolis: The Indiana AIDS Fund, 1996), 56; There are many sources that report different numbers of people with AIDS. During the initial outbreak, people were misdiagnosed, refused to get tested, or reporting centers did not accurately share information. Here, I am using statistic on AIDS in Indiana reported to the State Health Department as an official source on numbers of people with AIDS.

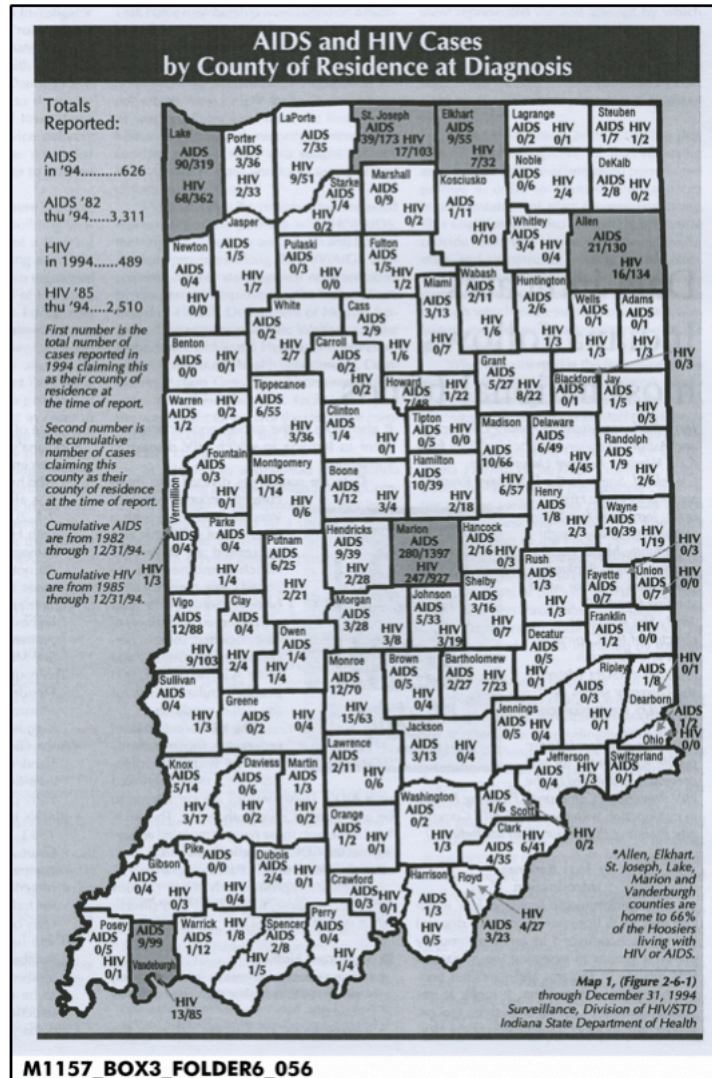


Figure 0.1 – The Division of HIV/STD of the Indiana State Department of Health collected data from each county regarding reported numbers of AIDS and HIV cases from 1982 through 1994. Indiana AIDS and HIV 1982-1994 Map, The Picture: A Needs Assessment and Overview of the Indiana HIV/AIDS Arena (Indianapolis: The Indiana AIDS Fund, 1996), 56, Mark A. Lee LGBT Photo Collection, Indiana Historical Society.

In Marion County alone, the Indiana State Board of Health reported 927 cases of HIV and 1,397 cases of AIDS between 1982 and 1994. Importantly, though, doctors believed that most Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and AIDS cases were going unreported



or diagnosed.<sup>9</sup> Ideas of “gay plague” and discrimination permeated even after scientists proved AIDS was not only contracted by gay men.<sup>10</sup> Many people with the disease were receiving little if any assistance from the government. In Indiana, and across the United States, gay men and women formed organizations to care for one another. They also protested that more attention needed to be paid to this disease by politicians and the medical profession.

One such organization in Marion County, the Indianapolis Bag Ladies, played a pivotal role by providing AIDS education and end-of-life care for people with AIDS. They built community via drag performances, created networks of allies, and developed support structures within local religious and secular organizations in response to the national AIDS crisis. Through their service and fundraising, the Bag Ladies destigmatized the “gay plague” by being open and straightforward about the new disease affecting the gay community locally and nationally.

This thesis discusses and analyses the history of the Indianapolis Bag Ladies and their efforts in Indianapolis. Chapter One explores the origins of the Bag Ladies and what inspired their decades of work on and off the stage. When they began their work in 1981, AIDS had yet to be reported in Indianapolis. This did not stop the Bag Ladies from instituting a fundraising and awareness organization for those with AIDS. Chapter Two

---

<sup>9</sup> Greta Hughson, “Factsheet: CD4 Cell Counts,” *aidsmap*, 2017, [www.aidsmap.com/CD4-cell-counts/page/1044596/](http://www.aidsmap.com/CD4-cell-counts/page/1044596/). HIV, the virus that causes AIDS, was discovered in 1986. HIV is spread through contact with the blood stream. HIV becomes an AIDS diagnosis when a person’s CD4 cell count is less than 200. A healthy person has a CD4 cell count between 500 and 1,500. CD4 cells are white blood cells in the immune system that act as a body’s natural defense system. AIDS is the fourth and final stage of an HIV infection.

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Fee and Nancy Krieger, “The Emerging Histories of AIDS: Three Successive Paradigms,” *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences* 15, no. 3 (1993): 460-463.

introduces one Bag Lady who went above and beyond the call of duty in order to educate people on how to protect themselves, Nurse Safe Sexx. Nurse Safe Sexx began as the persona of Kenn King, eventually evolving into a myriad of educational materials that have created King's legacy. Chapter Three discusses two programs established by the Bag Ladies, the Buddy House and the Buddy Support Program. These programs were designed to provide direct service in their community. The Bag Ladies were able to directly assist people with AIDS through these programs. These two programs provided the framework for several of the leading AIDS and HIV programs in the city. Chapter Four explores an interesting relationship between the Bag Ladies and several religious organizations in the city. Although these seemingly different organizations disagreed on the method of AIDS prevention and education, they were able to work together to provide care and comfort to those in Indianapolis with AIDS. The Damien Center is the city's premier HIV and AIDS care center and was established because of the relationship between the Bag Ladies and several local churches.

The public program described in Chapter Five continues to expand on themes and topics discussed in the thesis and how the Bag Ladies are only a portion of the Indiana LGBTQ communities. Dragtivism was a public program held at the Indiana Historical Society in 2019 as a part of this thesis. The IUPUI Public History Graduate Program encourages students to create a Public History component in addition to their written thesis. This thesis focuses on the Indianapolis Bag Ladies; however, they are not the only organization that uses drag or similar performance to uplift and advocate for their community. The creation of the public program, Dragtivism, was integral to the narrative of this thesis. This program demonstrates that the Bag Ladies were trailblazers in their

community, but that other portions of the LGBTQ communities were underrepresented in their organization. Dragtivism was created to foster a safe space for queer history at the Indiana Historical society but also to provide a space for straight people to get connected with the different facets of the LGBTQ drag community.

## CHAPTER ONE – BAG LADIES’ ORIGINS

The origin and evolution of Bag Ladies is best described in the words of their Queen Mother, Coburn (Coby) Palmer: “the Bag Ladies brought a lot of the community together for the first year because it was just a party, and we’re fun - but when the AIDS crisis hit, it really knitted everything together. We had a reason, a cause, and we fought for that cause.<sup>11</sup>” Last-minute Halloween plans in 1981 turned into a community effort to assist those with AIDS, and by 1982 the Bag Ladies changed the face of the AIDS crisis in Indianapolis. As Palmer notes, the Bag Ladies began as another local Halloween party. This party was intended to be the party of the year but had no other intention. Once the organizers of the first party began to grasp the gravity of the AIDS crisis nationally and potentially in their own community, the mission of the Halloween tour changed. They decided to throw the ultimate party, but it would also serve as an opportunity to raise money for those in need. The Bag Ladies’ founders were driven to focus their fun Halloween tour on raising money due to their experiences with those already suffering from AIDS. This initial motivation led the Bag Ladies to expand their efforts to a direct service approach in their own community. Through their efforts, an analysis of what the gay communities as well as those with AIDS were facing in Indianapolis can be made.

---

<sup>11</sup> Coby Palmer Oral History and Transcript, 2015, SC 3442, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, 4. “Queen Mother” refers to the honorary title the Bag Ladies bestowed upon Coby Palmer. Palmer is the only living founder of the organization and thus the “Mother.” Each year, the Bag Ladies elect a new Queen, someone who will represent and promote the organization for that following year. Palmer’s Queen Mother Status designates his important position within the organization.

## **The Beginning of the Bag Ladies**

In October 1981, John Irish, a member of the Indianapolis gay community, decided not to have his annual Halloween party. A group of the “usual” guests decided they were not going to let this ruin their Halloween fun, so they threw their own.<sup>12</sup> Coby Palmer, Gary Johnson, and Ed Walsh teamed up by renting three charter busses for their new “Bag Ladies Bus.” They wanted to emulate the New York “bag ladies,” who were fun, campy, and had lots of “chutzpah” that Palmer had learned about from a NY newspaper.<sup>13</sup> Their campy drag look was also an inspiration for this name because they often dressed in whatever they could find toting trash bags around to collect money. They resembled homeless women who were often called “bag ladies.”

Invitations in little brown bags were sent to seventy or eighty people. Coby Palmer was surprised that “amazingly, all showed up.”<sup>14</sup> Instructions for the “Metro Bag Lady Express” were as follows: get dressed at either Ed Walsh’s house or at Coby Palmer’s card shop, Just Cards, both located in Broad Ripple. Then, join scheduled events that kicked off at 8p.m. at The Hunt and Chase. Next, a show at The Club, a stop at Talbott Street bar, with participants finishing off the night by 3:30 a.m. back at The Hunt and Chase. Participants were told to be sensible about footwear and be in costume: “IZODs and designer jeans are strictly a No-No.”<sup>15</sup> The first tour was all about fun as drag queens boarded their busses to tour the gay bars of Indianapolis. The costumed

---

<sup>12</sup> Coby Palmer Oral History and Transcript, 2015, SC 3442, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, 5.

<sup>13</sup> “History,” The Bag Ladies, 2018, <http://bagladiesindy.org/who-we-are/history/>. Coby Palmer, interview by Kara Chinn, 2018. Unfortunately, Palmer has not kept track of where he found this article that inspired the naming of the Bag Ladies.

<sup>14</sup> Coby Palmer Oral History and Transcript, 2015, SC 3442, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, 5.

<sup>15</sup> “Bag Lady Express, 81,” Bag Ladies Personal Collection.

ladies packed trash bags full of “camp drag” costumes, changing between stops. Most changed clothes at least five or six times. Camp drag is one of the many forms of drag performed. It is well known for exaggeration, satire, or ironically bad taste. For the Bag Ladies, it meant dressing in exaggerated makeup and clothing while retaining their own personal styles such as facial hair.<sup>16</sup> Their invitation’s mention of specific designer clothing, for example IZODS, signals that the members of the Bag Ladies consisted mostly of upper middle-class men who could afford nice clothing. They were able to “poke fun” at the idea of being homeless because none of the members were actually experiencing it. The term “bag lady” was used to describe homeless women who carried multiple large bags with all their belongings. The Bag Ladies were imitating this idea because they dressed in whatever outfits they could thrift and carried multiple changes of clothes around in large bags. According to the Indianapolis Bag Ladies, “Being a ‘professional’ bag lady called for smart shopping” at local thrift stores including Goodwill and AM VETS. For those who really wanted to embrace the experience, Costumes by Margie was known for making some “special creations.”<sup>17</sup> Coby Palmer recalls the first bus tour just being about “camp drag and having a blast” something that would shift as the AIDS crisis received greater attention.<sup>18</sup>

Palmer, a native of New York, having heard about the men in his home state being affected by this mysterious disease, decided to visit the Gay Men’s Health Crisis

---

<sup>16</sup> See Paige Turner, “The 11 Most Common Drag Queen Styles,” *Queerty*, 2014, <https://www.queerty.com/11-common-drag-queen-styles-20140603>.

<sup>17</sup> Bag Lady Express, 81.

<sup>18</sup> Connie Zeigler, “Backtrack: Drags to Riches,” *Indianapolis Monthly*, (Indianapolis, IN), October 2017.

organization during one of his business trips.<sup>19</sup> While in Indiana, Palmer had learned about the Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), an organization out of New York that emerged out of an informal gathering of about 80 people in the living room of Larry Kramer to discuss the "gay cancer." GMHC evolved into one of the first AIDS service organizations gathering in 1981 to raise money for research and awareness. By 1982, Nathan Fain, Larry Kramer, Larry Mass, Paul Popham, Paul Rapoport, and Edmund White had officially established the GMHC in New York City.<sup>20</sup> It would end up being one of the leading organizations in the national fight against AIDS. They set up a makeshift hospice care facility aimed at providing medical care for those affected with HIV and AIDS. Their initial patients were not expected to recover, so GMHC provided palliative care as well.<sup>21</sup> On this visit to the GMHC, Palmer saw the devastation AIDS was leaving in its wake. He decided to turn the tour into a "frontal assault" on what he called "the plague."<sup>22</sup> This frontal assault began with a drag show benefit held at the Talbott Street Bar in Indianapolis. The next step was turning the Halloween Bus tour into one of the largest fundraisers for AIDS victims in Indianapolis. In using the image of a

---

<sup>19</sup> Coby Palmer Oral History and Transcript, 2015, SC 3442, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis. At this time, Palmer also worked for Kittel's Furniture as a buyer. He often traveled to New York to check out current furniture trends and to purchase items for the furniture store.

<sup>20</sup> "GMHC/ HIV/AIDS Timeline," Gay Men's Health Crisis, 2018, <http://www.gmhc.org/about-us/gmhchivaids-timeline>.

<sup>21</sup> Coby Palmer interview conducted by Kara Chinn. "About Us," Gay Men's Health Crisis, 2018, <http://www.gmhc.org/about-us>. As the AIDS crisis continued, GMHC expanded their efforts around education and advocacy as well as continuing care for patients. They also provided one of the first AIDS hotlines in 1982 when Roger McFarlane, a GMHC volunteer, received over 100 calls in one night to his home phone with requests for more information on AIDS.

<sup>22</sup> Connie Zeigler, "Backtrack: Drags to Riches," *Indianapolis Monthly*, (Indianapolis, IN), October 2017.

“frontal assault” to describe their work, Palmer followed a long-standing tradition of using military terms when describing and discussing disease. This can be seen as early as the mid 17<sup>th</sup> century in the works of physician Thomas Sydenham, who described attacking and destroying disease through his system of “therapeutics.”<sup>23</sup> Using military terms aid is what Abraham Fuks calls the “reification of disease.”<sup>24</sup> Military metaphors allow for physicians and patients to make the disease more concrete, better conceptualized, and more easily discussed. In this language, there is a clear set of actors; the disease is the enemy, the commander is the physician, the combatant is the patient, and the weaponry is the treatments.<sup>25</sup> Although the Bag Ladies and the people with AIDS they were working with did not have a physician-patient relationship, they also embraced military terminology when describing HIV and AIDS.

In the Midwest, fear and uncertainty filled the Indianapolis gay community as men continued to become sick and die. Edmond (Ed) Talucci, one of the first Bag Ladies and the 2005 Bag Lady Queen, recalls learning about the death of his friend Gary Johnson’s partner, which was the first time AIDS had affected his life personally.<sup>26</sup> Additional cases followed and were reported like “an avalanche.” “People would be out and partying and the next thing you knew they weren’t out and then the next thing you

---

<sup>23</sup> Abraham Fuks, “The Military Metaphors of Modern Medicine,” (2009), 2-3.

<sup>24</sup> Abraham Fuks, “The Military Metaphors of Modern Medicine,” (2009), 3.

<sup>25</sup> Dr. Dhruv Khular, “The Trouble with Medicine’s Metaphors,” *The Atlantic*, August 17, 2014.

<sup>26</sup> “Bag Lady Queens,” The Bag Ladies, 2018, <http://bagladiesindy.org/who-we-are/the-queens/bag-lady-queens/>. Within the Bag Ladies organization, each year a Queen is chosen based on her fundraising efforts and contributions to the organization. Her reign lasts the full year, from one Bus Tour to the next, and she is expected to represent the Bag Ladies in a positive and participatory manner. In 2005, Edmond Talucci was selected as the Bag Lady Queen honoring his dedication to the organization since its founding.



knew they were really bad and then the next thing you knew they were gone, in just months it went so fast,” remembered Talucci.<sup>27</sup> Accurate reporting of cause of death for many early AIDS patients was hindered by doctors who were reluctant to disclose an accurate cause of death. Obituaries written about infected individuals often avoided disclosing cause of death. This continued the practice of patients in life who sought to distance themselves from the diagnosis and potential public disclosure for their own safety or desire not to be targeted as an AIDS patient. Additionally, the underlying cause of death was often overlooked. Many people with AIDS died after contracting an opportunistic infection with the underlying disease of AIDS not formally noted in medical records. These challenges not only made it difficult for accurate reporting on the number of cases and their outcomes but also present a challenge to historians seeking to explore the epidemic as data is fragmentary at best.

The efforts of the GMHC in New York chronologically paralleled those of the Indianapolis Bag Ladies. In Indianapolis, Coby Palmer urged the Bag Ladies to hold a memorial, fund-raiser, and candle light service for people with AIDS in 1982. The second bus tour was kicked off by Ed Walsh and Steve Willis, who wanted to build a tradition of “putting the fun back into fundraising.”<sup>28</sup> Busses were boarded by drag-clad “ladies” with large bags in tow in order to collect money to send to the Gay Men’s Health Crisis. They sought as well to create a “war chest” for Indianapolis. Although an AIDS diagnosis had not been recorded in Indianapolis by this time, the Bag Ladies began to prepare for the

---

<sup>27</sup> Edmond Talucci Oral History Interview and Transcript, 2014, SC 3338, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, 11.

<sup>28</sup> Shari Rudavsky, “The bearded bag lady who leads the fight against AIDS,” *Indianapolis Star* (Indianapolis, IN), Jun 13, 2014.

disease to impact their community. To do this, they only sent half the money collected on the night of the first fundraising bus tour to GMHC and kept half for people in Indianapolis.<sup>29</sup>

The Bag Ladies became the first fundraising and awareness group for people with AIDS in Indianapolis.<sup>30</sup> Official non-profit status was necessary for the Bag Ladies to legitimize themselves as a valid fundraising entity not only to raise money in a credible way but also to use that money to establish programs to further assist the community. This status also made the organization tax-exempt further allowing the Bag Ladies to assist community members. Ed Walsh, one of the founding members of the Bag Ladies, worked for Melvin Simon, of the later-named Simon Property Group, in the accounting and budgeting department. His business knowledge and professionalism were an asset to the organization in his role as its first president.<sup>31</sup> On May 16, 1984, two years after their first tour, the Bag Ladies became The Bag Ladies Incorporated as filed with the Secretary of State of Indiana.<sup>32</sup> Darrell Arthur, another Bag Lady, asked his mother to assist the organization in getting the original papers filed with the IRS to have 501(c)(3) status at the federal level.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>29</sup> Edmond Talucci Oral History Interview and Transcript, 2014, SC 3338, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, 11.

<sup>30</sup> “History,” The Bag Ladies, 2018, <http://bagladiesindy.org/who-we-are/history/>.

<sup>31</sup> Edmond Talucci Oral History Interview and Transcript, 2014, SC 3338, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, 19.

<sup>32</sup> The group remained filed under this name until 1998 when they changed their name to AIDServe Indiana, Inc. in order to further legitimize their fundraising goals. See “AIDServe Indiana Inc.: Names History,” IN.gov, 1984. <https://bsd.sos.in.gov/PublicBusinessSearch/BusinessInformation?businessId=221385&businessType=Domestic%20Nonprofit%20Corporation&isSeries=False>.

<sup>33</sup> Edmond Talucci Oral History Interview and Transcript, 2014, SC 3338, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, 19.

## **AIDS on the National Stage**

The early years of the AIDS crisis were filled with deep uncertainty and fear. There was little information about AIDS including how it was contracted, treated, and who could get it. This uncertainty coupled with the perception that it was a death sentence for those who contracted the illness led to widespread fear. The conservative United States government under President Ronald Reagan was of little help. It was not until the end of his second term, in May 1987, that Reagan publicly addressed the AIDS crisis for the first time.<sup>34</sup> The federal government's recognition was necessary to establish government funding for AIDS research and treatment. Nationally, organizations like ACT UP were protesting the Reagan Administration's (and later the Bush Administration's) lack of reaction to the AIDS crisis by championing the idea that "Silence = Death."<sup>35</sup> This campaign demonstrated that by ignoring the disease, research for finding a solution would be slow or non-existent. Lack of treatment led to thousands of deaths across the nation. By the time that Reagan spoke on AIDS at the Third International Conference on AIDS in 1987, 36,058 Americans had been diagnosed with AIDS. Of that number, 20,849 had died and AIDS had spread to 113 countries. Lack of accurate education provided by public service agencies perpetuated the fear around AIDS. Initially, many Americans believed that AIDS was a homosexual disease only. This was exacerbated by it being named Gay-Related Immunodeficiency Deficiency.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>34</sup> Allen White, "Reagan's AIDS Legacy/ Silence = Death," *SFGate*, (San Francisco, CA) Jun 8, 2004.

<sup>35</sup> Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight against AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

<sup>36</sup> Lawrence K. Altman, "New Homosexual Disorder Worries Health Officials," *The New York Times* (May 11, 1982): 1.

AIDS was often seen as a “punishment from God” to homosexuals for their supposedly immoral behaviors.<sup>37</sup>

Fear of contracting AIDS among straight Americans increased because of unique cases of the disease that became well known in the mid-1980s. One highly publicized case was that of Ryan White, a white teenager from Kokomo, Indiana diagnosed in December of 1984 with AIDS who received extensive national attention.<sup>38</sup> He had contracted the disease from a blood transfusion necessary to combat Factor VIII, a hemophiliac condition that prevents the blood from clotting properly.<sup>39</sup> White was perceived as an “innocent victim” of the disease both because he was a child and had contracted HIV through a medical procedure. Even with this status as “innocent,” Ryan was not allowed to return to school for fear he might infect other children. Disclosures of AIDS cases in children launched a greater panic across the United States. Those who once believed they were safe from infection under the rationale it was a homosexual disease were no longer considered safe from the pandemic. “Now a household word, it’s [AIDS] invading ‘straight’ world,” wrote Carol Elrod of the *Indianapolis Star* in the summer of 1985 in her coverage of White.<sup>40</sup>

Newspapers provided some education to the public about AIDS, including noting saliva in the list of bodily fluids that could transmit AIDS, something that would be

---

<sup>37</sup> Anthony M. Petro, *After the Wrath of God: AIDS, Sexuality, and American Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 24.

<sup>38</sup> “Who was Ryan White?” Heath Resources and Services Administration, 2016, <https://hab.hrsa.gov/about-ryan-white-hivaids-program/who-was-ryan-white>.

<sup>39</sup> “F8 Gene: Coagulation factor VIII,” U.S. National Library of Medicine, 2010, <https://ghr.nlm.nih.gov/gene/F8#conditions>.

<sup>40</sup> Carol Elrod, “Now a Household Word, It’s Invading ‘Straight’ World,” *Indianapolis Star* (Indianapolis, IN), Aug. 4, 1985.

proven untrue by 1986.<sup>41</sup> Due to the evolving nature of the research on AIDS, it was difficult for medical professionals to get accurate information out to the public. Professionals continually clarified what bodily fluids and behaviors led to AIDS transmission. This confusion led to further panic by the American public as they were unsure of how they could be infected or what prevented individuals from contracting the disease.

Citizens of Indiana were no exception when it came to fear and panic towards AIDS and HIV. Little education about methods of contraction or prevention permeated the general public. Indiana newspapers, where most people would have received their information, didn't begin reporting on AIDS until about 1985, several years into the crisis. This delayed reporting was common in similar small cities. Human T-lymphotropic retrovirus (HTLV III), now known as HIV, was discovered in 1983 as the virus that causes AIDS. Hoosiers were told that this virus could be transmitted through bodily fluids including blood, semen, urine, feces and "perhaps saliva" but not through casual contact with infected persons.<sup>42</sup> Transmission, they were told, was possible even if those infected did not exhibit symptoms. One article in the *Indianapolis Star* described the various ways to contract AIDS beyond homosexual encounters with gay men.

---

<sup>41</sup> C. Everett Koop, "Understanding AIDS: Surgeon General's report on AIDS," U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, October 22, 1986. This method of transmission was proven scientifically unsound in 1986 when the U.S. Surgeon General released a report on AIDS and outlined the ways in which AIDS could and could not be contracted. In this report, the Surgeon General also called for a nationwide education campaign that included earlier sex education, increased use of condoms, safe sex education, and voluntary HIV testing. This brochure was sent out to all households in the United States.

<sup>42</sup> Carol Elrod, "Now a Household Word, It's Invading 'Straight' World," *Indianapolis Star* (Indianapolis, IN), Aug. 4, 1985.

Hemophiliacs were infected through tainted donated blood. Even one HIV-positive person could contaminate an entire community and their blood supply. Women who had been artificially inseminated in Australia had contracted AIDS, stoking fear in those struggling with fertility issues. Dr. Mervyn Silverman, an official from San Francisco, warned that “whether homosexual or heterosexual – anyone who hasn’t been monogamous for the last five years ‘would be prudent not to share body fluids. It’s a behavioral disease. It’s what you do or don’t do that determines whether you get the disease.’”<sup>43</sup> This type of reporting perpetuated fear and deepened the stigma attached to gay men with AIDS. They were often seen as responsible for spreading the disease due to perception they were non-monogamous.

Medical professionals themselves did not want to touch or care for individuals with AIDS. In 1985, the *Indianapolis Star* noted how, “in recent months, health care professionals have become concerned about catching AIDS while caring for patients”<sup>44</sup> In the early stages of the pandemic, once given an AIDS diagnosis, people were sent home to die. Not until 1985 were hospitals preparing to accept AIDS patients. That year, Ball Hospital in Muncie, Indiana was one of the first in Indiana to announce their preparations for AIDS patients.<sup>45</sup> Unfortunately, this was several years into the epidemic. As a result, organizations like the Bag Ladies were left to fill the gap created by the confusion and lack of preparation by the formal medical community.

---

<sup>43</sup> Carol Elrod, “Now a Household Word, It’s Invading ‘Straight’ World,” *Indianapolis Star* (Indianapolis, IN), Aug. 4, 1985.

<sup>44</sup> Carol Elrod, “Now a Household Word, It’s Invading ‘Straight’ World,” *Indianapolis Star* (Indianapolis, IN), Aug. 4, 1985.

<sup>45</sup> Fred Lake, “Ball Hospital Ready in Case AIDS Patient is Admitted for Care,” *Muncie Star* (Muncie, IN), Dec. 29, 1985.

## CHAPTER TWO – NURSE SAFE SEX: AIDS EDUCATION AND PREVENTION

In the late fall of 1985, a colorful character hit the Indianapolis stage for the first time. Introduced by the Bag Ladies to the Indianapolis gay community, Nurse Safe Sexx's first appearance was at a benefit at Greg's Our Place for AIDS awareness and fundraising.<sup>46</sup> An instant hit, she revolutionized the way AIDS education was promoted throughout the city. Nurse Safe Sexx would eventually go on to receive national recognition for her work educating others. The character Nurse Safe Sexx was developed by Bag Lady Kenn King to spread awareness about safe sex practices within the gay community.



Figure 2.1 – Nurse Safe Sexx was often featured in several local, Indianapolis gay magazines and newspapers. She wrote columns and published cartoons in order to spread her safe sex message. Kenn King as Nurse Safe Sexx, *The Works*, March 1986, Bohr/Indy Pride/Gonzalez Collection, Indiana Historical Society.

---

<sup>46</sup> Kenn King, "The Nurse Safe Sexx Cartoons: A Cute Little Idea That Has Become a Big Educational Tool for the Gay Community," *The Mirror* 1, no. 14 (September 1986).

The performance relied on connecting with members of the gay community to decrease AIDS-related stigma by moving the educational process away from the pessimistic and depressing AIDS education that was being produced by medical professionals. Although not as well known nationally as other safe sex campaigns, the work of Kenn King as Nurse Safe Sexx directly altered the social and sexual health outcomes of gay men in Indianapolis during the 1980s.

Safe sex efforts and politics around gay healthcare began nationally in the 1970s. Historian Katie Batza studied three clinics that she argues “were trailblazers of gay health activism in the 1970s and the most influential, innovative, and lasting organizations.”<sup>48</sup> The Fenway Community Health Clinic in Boston, the Gay Community Services Center in Los Angeles, and Howard Brown Memorial Clinic in Chicago were “nurtured by four social and political factors of the 1970s: gay liberation, the questioning of medical authority, the continuation of 1960s radicalism, and Great Society- era government policies that encouraged community health efforts.” As sexually transmitted infections (STIs), especially Hepatitis B and venereal disease, spread throughout the gay community men sought medical advice from each other rather than doctors whom they did not trust. Psychiatrist Thomas R. Blair argues that gay health action took hold a decade prior to the AIDS epidemic as a result of “amphibious” individuals, those in the medical profession who also identified as gay, were crucial to gay health activism.<sup>49</sup> From its inception, advice provided by non-medical professionals around safe sex was

---

<sup>48</sup> Katie Batza, *Before AIDS: Gay Health Politics in the 1970s* (Philadelphia, University of Philadelphia Press, 2018), 8.

<sup>49</sup> Thomas R. Blair, “Safe Sex in the 1970s: Community Practitioners on the Eve of AIDS,” *American Journal of Public Health* 107, no. 6 (June 2017): 872.



frequently presented in a humorous manner. The San Francisco-based Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, for example, called upon gay men to decrease risky sexual behaviors through cartoons of “frisky nuns with mustaches.”<sup>47</sup>



Figure 2.2 – The original Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence gained attention and popularity by dressing in full habits. Bobbi Campbell with Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, Courtesy of the UCSF Archives & Special Collections, Bobbi Campbell Diary, MSS 96-33.

Often AIDS awareness and prevention material carried a depressing and bleak tone that was meant to scare people to prevent them from contracting the disease.<sup>48</sup> They connected AIDS with death, war, and disease. A poster created by the Hawaii Department of Health titled “AIDS Is No Party” illustrated how AIDS caused premature death. An empty chair next to a balloon, party hat, and birthday cake marked with a “25”

---

<sup>47</sup> Thomas R. Blair, “Safe Sex in the 1970s: Community Practitioners on the Eve of AIDS,” *American Journal of Public Health* 107, no. 6 (June 2017): 875.

<sup>48</sup> “Which of These Can Give You AIDS?” Chicago, Illinois Dartnell Corporation 1987, U.S. National Library of Medicine AIDS Poster Collection.; “AIDS Causes Blindness,” AIDS Action Committee of Massachusetts 1986, U.S. National Library of Medicine AIDS Poster Collection; “AIDS and Families with Dependent Children,” Milwaukee AIDS Project 1987, U.S. National Library of Medicine AIDS Poster Collection; “AIDS Does Not Discriminate,” Brooklyn AIDS Task Force 1985, U.S. National Library of Medicine AIDS Poster Collection.

warned people that if they did not play safe, use condoms, or share needles, they would die young.<sup>49</sup>



Figure 2.3 – Much early AIDS informational material featured messages with disheartening and depressing tones. This poster, shared by many state health departments, warns that AIDS was a death sentence. “AIDS Is No Party,” Hawaii Department of Health 1985, U.S. National Library of Medicine AIDS Poster Collection.

Even posters created to decrease stigma and fear were often confusing because they were not explicit in how to prevent contracting AIDS. Another example of this type of AIDS education is a poster created by the Brooklyn AIDS Task force called “AIDS Does Not Discriminate.” It warned that no one was safe from AIDS, a disease that sill

---

<sup>49</sup> “AIDS Is No Party,” Hawaii Department of Health 1985, U.S. National Library of Medicine AIDS Poster Collection.

carried a death sentence. This poster did not educate people on how to prevent transmission of HIV and AIDS.



Figure 2.4 – This poster plays on stigmatic language and perpetuates the fear of AIDS without educating readers on how to prevent transmission. “AIDS Does Not Discriminate,” Brooklyn AIDS Task Force ca. 1980s, U.S. National Library of Medicine AIDS Poster Collection.

A poster created by the AIDS Institute at the New York State Health Department, reprinted by many other state health departments, including Illinois, showed four ways in which a person cannot contract AIDS.<sup>50</sup> These include shaking hands, sharing utensils, using the same bathrooms, or touching doorknobs. The poster provided a way for people to get more information by contacting the Illinois State AIDS Hotline. Although this

<sup>50</sup> “None of These Will Give You AIDS,” Illinois State AIDS Hotline 1985, U.S. National Library of Medicine AIDS Poster Collection.

poster was designed to reduce fear that AIDS can be contracted through casual contact, it did not tell people how AIDS was actually transmitted or how to protect themselves against transmission.

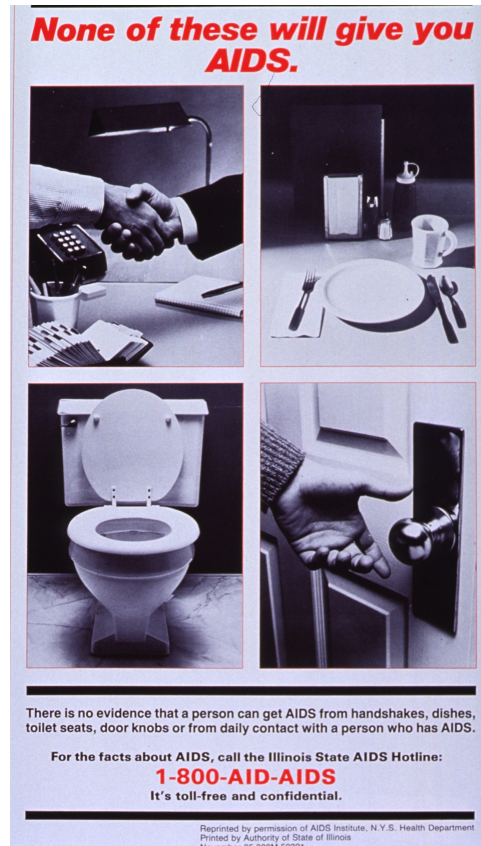


Figure 2.5 – This poster aimed at teaching readers about common misconceptions on AIDS transmission methods. Although this poster is more positive, it still does not educate readers about real transmission or prevention methods. “None of These Will Give You AIDS,” Illinois State AIDS Hotline 1985, U.S. National Library of Medicine AIDS Poster Collection.

Gay health activists of the 1980s built upon the “strong gay medical infrastructure” created by activists of the earlier, and more socially supportive, decade to provide more useful information about AIDS.<sup>51</sup> Historian Cindy Patton’s work recognizes a difference in the ‘mainstream’ definition of safe sex and the gay

---

<sup>51</sup> Katie Batza, *Before AIDS: Gay Health Politics in the 1970s* (Philadelphia, University of Philadelphia Press, 2018), 12.

‘community’ definition and the fact that “official naming bodies – media, government agencies, research and policy enterprises – have more power to disperse meanings” of safe sex.<sup>52</sup> The religious right as well as other non-right wing religious communities believed safe sex was abstinence until heterosexual marriage and monogamy. Gay men and women were not receiving access to alternative definitions of safe sex because these communities dominated public educational discourse. This gap in a more robust safe sex education allowed members of the gay community to educate others in order to reduce the harm of unsafe sex practices. This opportunity was grasped by the safe sex education campaign of Nurse Safe Sexx in Indiana.

Organizations were able to transfer much of their STI safe sex literature to the AIDS epidemic. King repurposed much of the literature he passed out from larger, and more established, gay health organizations including the Gay Men’s Health Crisis, LA Cares Los Angeles, The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, and the Howard Brown Clinic in Chicago. There was more material available from these organizations because they were situated in the urban centers home to large gay communities with the most expansive knowledge base. The literature was originally created for safe sex practices to prevent the contraction of all STIs, not just HIV and AIDS. King would cut apart and paste together different elements of literature received from these larger organizations which he augmented with his own midwestern information. These “mock ups” had to be approved by the Bag Lady board before they could be sent out via their distribution network of

---

<sup>52</sup> Cindy Patton “Safe Sex/Save Lives: Evolving Modes of Activism,” *AIDS, Drugs and Prevention*, ed. Tim Rhodes (Milton Park: Taylor and Frances Ltd, 1996), 120.; Michael J. McVicar, “The Religious Right in America,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* (March 2016): 1.

local gay bars. Accompanying the literature and Nurse Safe Sexx performances the Bag Ladies also distributed condoms and lubricant.<sup>53</sup>

In the early 1980s through the 1990s, mainstream society often had either a lack of information or incorrect information on how HIV and AIDS was transmitted. Those who did have the correct information attempted to share this information as broadly as they could. The most common method of HIV transmission was through sexual intercourse. Semen as well as blood had the ability to transmit HIV. HIV could get into the blood stream through small tears in the skin, especially through unprotected anal intercourse.<sup>54</sup> The *Muncie Star* published an infographic that charted the most at-risk groups in their December 29, 1985 issue. According to their reporting, seventy-three percent of the people who contracted HIV were homosexual men.<sup>55</sup> This alarming rate of infection caused great concern among the Bag Ladies. There was no cure or vaccine for HIV and AIDS. Prevention through education was the best method to eradicating this disease.

Nurse Safe Sexx appeared at local bars and at Bag Ladies events. She used “high-camp gender-slam drag” as a means to draw attention to herself and her cause. “High-Camp” refers to the extreme side of camp drag that is designed to be of bad taste or ironic. This often means drag queens who keep their original facial hair and in no way attempt to look like a polished character. Gender Bending is the practice of dressing and

---

<sup>53</sup> Kenn King, interview by Kara Chinn, 2019.; Edmond Talucci Oral History Interview and Transcript, 2014, SC 3338, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, 19.

<sup>54</sup> Dr. Carrie Foote, AIDS and Society Course (IUPUI, Indianapolis, IN, 2018). Sexual intercourse, especially anal intercourse, is still the most common method of HIV transmission as of 2019.

<sup>55</sup> Fred Lake, “Ball Hospital Ready in Case AIDS Patient is Admitted for Care,” *Muncie Star* (Muncie, IN), Dec. 29, 1985, 1.



behaving like a member of the opposite sex. “Gender-slam” is similar to “gender bender” meaning a person who purposely dresses and behaves like a member of the opposite sex according to cultural norms.<sup>56</sup> Interviewed by Shirley from One Way bar in Indianapolis in 1986, Nurse Safe Sexx was asked, “Why the high camp drag?”<sup>57</sup> She responded: “It’s a tool to get people to notice. People listen to gender benders, and that’s all I ask. Gay people like to have fun and we are not giving up the fun of being gay.”

King was inspired by a Chicagoan Stephen Jones’s drag persona, Wanda Lust. Nurse Lust was a character from Chicago’s Man’s Country, a gay bathhouse, supported by the Harold Brown Memorial Clinic. Created during the 1970s, Nurse Lust developed when gay men were being discriminated against by traditional medical professionals.



Figure 2.6 – Nurse Wanda Lust was a bold character created by Stephen Jones. Her goal was to show support for gay men who were hospitalized due to several different STIs Stephen Johnson as Nurse Wanda Lust, Thousand Words Unlimited and Collection of Gary Chichester.

---

<sup>56</sup> Kenn King, interview by Kara Chinn, 2019. *Merriam-Webster*, “gender bender,” accessed March 27, 2019.

<sup>57</sup> Shirley, “An Interview with Nurse Safe Sexx,” *The Mirror* 1, no. 5 (January 1986): 23.

STIs were running rampant through the gay communities. Doctors often were unaware of how to properly treat gay men or refused to all together.<sup>58</sup> Those infected were avoiding treatment for fear they might be outed as homosexual due to a strict notification protocol implemented by Boards of Health. They feared ridicule from their families and friends, termination from their jobs, or other discriminatory harassment. They also worried about poor treatment by medical staff. Nurse Lust visited hospitals and patients in her “short and tight-fitting nurse’s uniform, a large oversized clock necklace, fake glasses, a bright red wig, high heels and a nurse’s hat and hairnet.”<sup>59</sup> She was able to put patients at ease while also representing the gay community. One man remembered Nurse Lust’s visit saying, “He was freedom, in my head. Outrageous could work if you made people laugh and have fun with them... Wanda was one of those people that made me feel good about my life.”<sup>60</sup> By acting as an advocate and ambassador in hospitals, a place where gay men felt most vulnerable, she was able to alter the relationship between gay men and sexual healthcare in the 1970s.

King’s Nurse Safe Sexx aimed to encourage people to replace risky behaviors with safer ones. “Safe sex with 1,000 men is as safe as any sex can be, but unsafe sex with one man is all it takes,” he noted.<sup>61</sup> Always wearing condoms and using lubricant, knowing the HIV status of your partners, and getting yourself tested were key to safer

---

<sup>58</sup> Katie Batza, *Before AIDS: Gay Health Politics in the 1970s* (Philadelphia, University of Philadelphia Press, 2018), 3-4.

<sup>59</sup> Katie Batza, *Before AIDS: Gay Health Politics in the 1970s* (Philadelphia, University of Philadelphia Press, 2018), 2.

<sup>60</sup> Katie Batza, *Before AIDS: Gay Health Politics in the 1970s* (Philadelphia, University of Philadelphia Press, 2018), 2.

<sup>61</sup> Kenn King, “Sexual Compulsion: A Tricky Habit,” *The Mirror* 2, no. 14 (March 1987).



sexual practice. King recalls one man who argued that his “package” [penis] was too large for any condom. To prove him wrong, Nurse Safe Sexx opened a condom and proceeded to slide it up her arm, all the way to her shoulder as the man was defending his position.<sup>62</sup> This interaction demonstrates how this character was able to publicly combat false ideas. It also illustrates the lack of education on safe sex practices within the gay community. Eventually, this encounter ended up being one of the Nurse Safe Sexx comic strips.<sup>63</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup> Kenn King, interview by Kara Chinn, 2019.

<sup>63</sup> “The Further Adventures of Nurse Safe Sexx: Introducing Big Pete,” *New Works News* (May 1987).



Figure 2.7 – This cartoon was one of several created based off of Kenn King’s experiences as Nurse Safe Sexx. “The Further Adventures of Nurse Safe Sexx: Introducing Big Pete,” *New Works News*, May 1987, Bohr/Indy Pride/Gonzalez Collection, Indiana Historical Society.

Kenn King and Nurse Safe Sexx's largest obstacle to their efforts was the stigma associated with AIDS. Kenn King's "high-camp gender-slam drag" certainly caught people's attention. It made education fun. However, individuals in the community were simultaneously afraid to be associated with someone talking openly about AIDS, making it difficult to find people to appear alongside Nurse Safe Sexx.<sup>64</sup> A Nurse Safe Sexx poster was only successful after a struggle to find someone to pose next to Nurse Safe Sexx. (Figure 2.8) Most refused the offer for fear of being associated with AIDS. They did not want anyone to think they had the disease. Originally, King's friend Isaac Coney volunteered to pose for the poster. He agreed to show his face and was excited to be a part of the project. Shortly following the photoshoot, Coney had second thoughts about being in the poster. He, an African American man, thought that being in the poster may skew the message that King was trying to provide. Due to racial discrimination, Coney believed that people who saw the poster would interpret the message "If you pick up one of these..." to mean a black man rather than simply a man. King reluctantly agreed and decided to continue the search. Finally, Phil Denton, later owner of Greg's Bar, agreed to pose for the poster as long as his face was not showing. The result was Nurse Safe Sexx toting his hot man on a handtruck reading "If you pick up one of these... ...be sure to pick up some of these." Condom use was promoted without the model's face. King recalled the strategy of choosing an attractive man, even if it was just his body, as a way to get people to look at the poster.<sup>65</sup> Nurse Safe Sexx contact information was included to

---

<sup>64</sup> Kenn King, "The Nurse Safe Sexx Cartoons: A Cute Little Idea That Has Become a Big Educational Tool for the Gay Community," *The Mirror* 1, no. 14 (September 1986); Edmond Talucci Oral History Interview and Transcript, 2014, SC 3338, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, 19.

<sup>65</sup> Kenn King, interview by Kara Chinn, 2019.

be widely shared in December of 1985 beginning with the Bag Ladies educational materials.



Figure 2.8 – The Nurse Safe Sexx poster was hung in gay bars throughout Indianapolis. The simple message was aimed at reminding patrons to stay safe as they thought about their evening plans. Nurse Safe Sexx Poster: It Could Save Your Life, Bohr/Indy Pride/Gonzalez Collection, Indiana Historical Society.

The hesitant reception of Nurse Safe Sexx by some within the gay community led Kenn King to create another character, the Hoosier Mom. Adapted from the character Zelda in *Poltergeist*, Hoosier Mom was portrayed by King's mother, Betty. She promoted the idea that gay men should practice safe sex for the sake of their mothers, who would be heartbroken to lose their sons to AIDS. Far more people posed with, and responded to, Hoosier Mom because of the idea that these men were still AIDS-free.<sup>66</sup> An older grey-

---

<sup>66</sup> Edmond Talucci Oral History Interview and Transcript, 2014, SC 3338, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, 19.

haired lady was far more approachable than the ostentatious Nurse Safe Sexx. A poster created featuring Hoosier Mom in the center of a small group of men and women around a pool table was popular.<sup>67</sup> The caption read “Play Safely Kids, Do it for Your Mother.”



Figure 2.9 – The Hoosier Mom poster was also distributed in gay bars around Indianapolis. This message was seen as more “wholesome” and easier for some men to receive. Hoosier Mom Poster, Bohr/Indy Pride/Gonzalez Collection, Indiana Historical Society.

<sup>67</sup> “Play Safely,” Hoosier Mom Poster, The Bag Ladies, Inc., 1983, M1242, OMB162, Michael Bohr Collection of the Indy Pride Chris Gonzalez Library and Archives ca. 1960s-2016. The term “play” is often used when discussing sex. The term is used to describe numerous different types of sex. “Play” is used as a euphemism that lightens the mood and can create a more erotic atmosphere. Using this term also allows people to describe sex without being explicit or offensive.

The poster also provided information on how to contact Hoosier Mom if you wanted more information. King recalls the reception to this new character and the unusual way people would get in contact with his mom. Betty worked at Coby Palmer's card shop, Just Cards. Many men would find her there and walk around for a half an hour or more, not pick anything up.<sup>68</sup> She would quietly ask them if they wanted information on AIDS or safe sex. Easily recognized at the card shop, this system and the shop provided a safe and comfortable environment for many people to get the information they needed.

Nurse Safe Sexx was caricatured and featured in Indianapolis gay newspapers including *The Mirror*, *The Word*, and *Metra*. In these cartoons, Nurse Safe Sexx would remind men to use protection during sex. These illustrations allowed Nurse Safe Sexx to reach a wider audience. She was able to promote local AIDS service organizations by letting readers know where they could get help if needed. Sitting at a bar in the usual Nurse Safe Sexx get up, King told a friend that he felt like a cartoon.<sup>69</sup> This feeling is what inspired King to begin his own comic strip. The Nurse Safe Sexx comic strip that resulted was created in collaboration with Richmond, Indiana cartoonist Rick Moore, who went by pen name RIK. Moore took King's detailed ideas and brought them to life as comics featuring members of the Bag Ladies. Blossom, Tonya Campisi, Hoosier Mom, and a few of Moore's own original characters, Kitte Littaire and John Q. Public, were depicted in comic-life. Kitte was the "unsafe" villain who discounted the Nurse's

---

<sup>68</sup> Kenn King, interview by Kara Chinn, 2019.

<sup>69</sup> Kenn King, "The Nurse Safe Sexx Cartoons: A Cute Little Idea That Has Become a Big Educational Tool for the Gay Community," *The Mirror* 1, no. 14 (September 1986).



recommendations. John Q. Public represented the “ignorance and prejudice of the general public.”<sup>70</sup>



Figure 2.10 – John Q. Public represented the ignorance of the American public. Here, Blossom teaches Public that AIDS does not mean the gay communities will stop living their lives. “The Further Adventures of Nurse Safe Sex: John Q. Public and Blossom,” *The Works*, May 1986, Bohr/Indy Pride/Gonzalez Collection, Indiana Historical Society.

<sup>70</sup> Kenn King, “The Nurse Safe Sex Cartoons: A Cute Little Idea That Has Become a Big Educational Tool for the Gay Community,” *The Mirror* 1, no. 14 (September 1986).

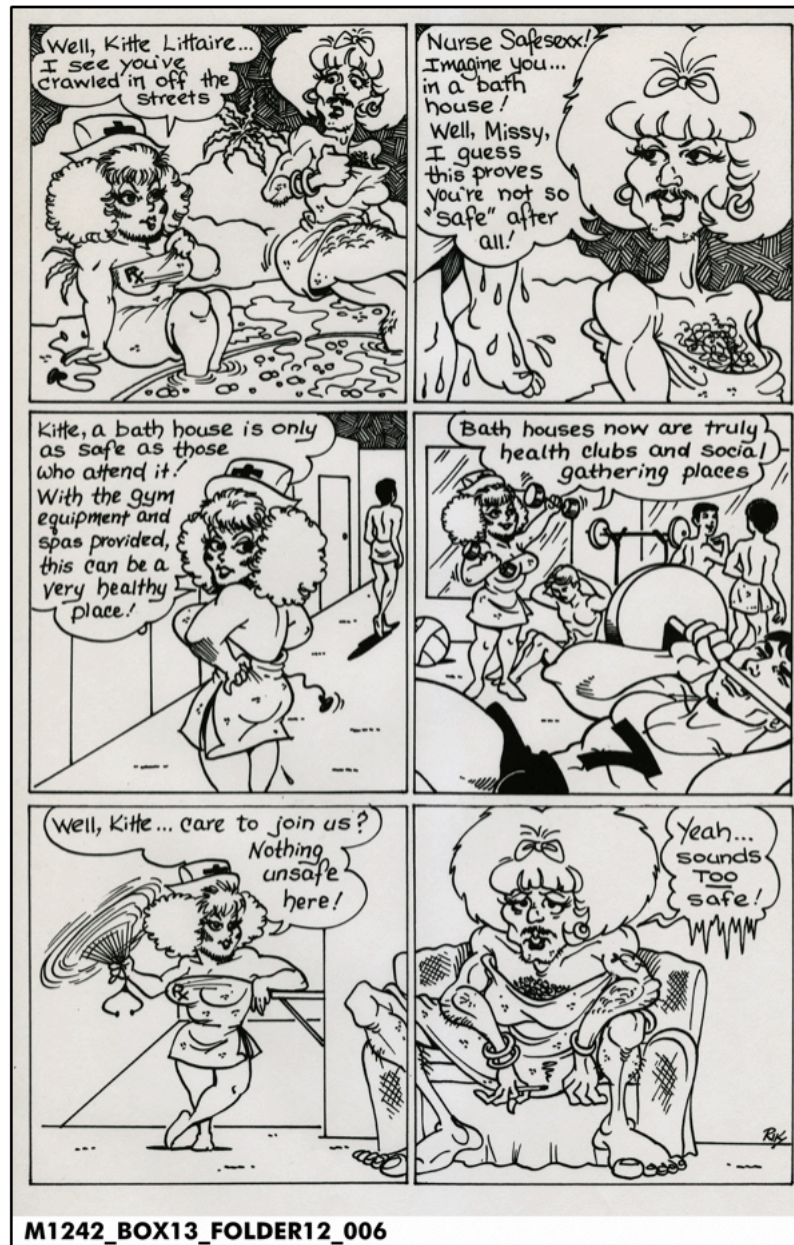


Figure 2.11 – Kittie Littaire, featured in several Nurse Safe Sexx cartoons, represented those who refused to practice safe sex. This cartoon demonstrates how, if the whole community practices safe sex, then everyone can remain healthy. “The Further Adventures of Nurse Safe Sexx: The Bathhouse,” *The Works*, March 1986, Bohr/Indy Pride/Gonzalez Collection, Indiana Historical Society.





Figure 2.12 – This cartoon shows how the trend of safe sex can be passed on. “The Further Adventures of Nurse Safe Sexx: Miss Slum Goddess,” *The Works*, January 1987, Bohr/Indy Pride/Gonzalez Collection, Indiana Historical Society.



Figure 2.13 – The Reagan Administration has been deeply criticized for the way it handled the AIDS crisis. Nurse Safe Sexx imagines a visit to the White House in this cartoon. She is received poorly following her questions regarding Reagan’s AIDS policies. “The Further Adventures of Nurse Safe Sexx: The Reagans,” *The Works*, June 1986, Bohr/Indy Pride/Gonzalez Collection, Indiana Historical Society.



Figure 2.14 – Nurse Safe Sexx parodies the iconic *Gone with the Wind* quote to insert her safe sex messaging. *Gone with the Wind* Cartoon, Bohr/Indy Pride/Gonzalez Collection, Indiana Historical Society.

Moore also created a group of one scene celebrity comics that featured Nurse Safe Sexx messaging connected to pop culture. One cartoon harkened back to *Gone with the Wind* and read “Safe Sex... Frankly, Scarlett, Sometimes you’ve got to give a damn!”





Figure 2.15 – Several of Jackson’s popular songs were combined to create a relatable safe sex message that could be easily remembered. Michael Jackson Cartoon, Bohr/Indy Pride/Gonzalez Collection, Indiana Historical Society.

In another cartoon, a dancing Nurse Safe Sex was drawn next to Michael Jackson with a caption that read, “Safe Sex... It’s a Thriller! When in doubt, Beat it!” This cartoon, like many others featured a double illusion. The lyrics of Jackson’s song were reinterpreted to suggest that if you could not practice safe sex, you had several options. One option was to get out of the situation and simply leave. Another option was to have non-penetrative sex. Either interpretation demonstrated that men would be able to protect themselves in any situation. Never copyrighted because both King and Moore hated the idea of copywriting AIDS literature, the comics were reportedly seen in newspapers as far as New York, New Jersey and California. The Gay Men’s Health Crisis also created a series of comic strips, Safer Sex Comix, that discussed safe sex. This comic strip, in the

form of small booklets, did not feature a consistent group of characters but played out different scenarios that could lead to sex and demonstrated how these could end up safely.<sup>71</sup> Imagery and language were direct and explicit, a method that proved to work within the gay communities. Each of these comix featured hunky, bulging men who are being set up to have great sex.<sup>72</sup> Safer Sex Comix #4 depicted a well-muscled and well-endowed plumber fixing a pipe under the sink. Declaring his work under the sink finished by saying “Well, that pipe’s all fixed,” another man, holding his hand in front of his cutoff shorts, looks as if he is suggesting another “pipe” that could use some attention.

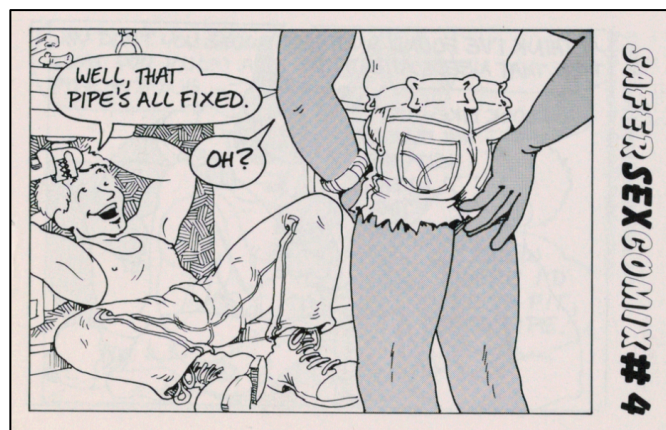


Figure 2.16 – Hyper masculinity was often a feature of gay culture. This cartoon highlights this idea through the use of a manual laborer and client. Safer Sex Comix #4, Gay Men's Health Crisis Safer Sex Comix, Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum /Art Resource, NY.

Safer Sex Comix #3 featured two shirtless chiseled men. One man, in an attempt to call a man named Bill, gets ahold of exotic Raoul instead. Both men sit in an open-legged position that highlights the bulges in their pants suggesting they have large penises and would be ideal to have sex with.

<sup>71</sup> “Safer Sex Comix,” The Gay Men’s Health Crisis Collection, Cooper Hewitt Archive.

<sup>72</sup> “Safer Sex Comix,” The Gay Men’s Health Crisis Collection, Cooper Hewitt Archive.



Figure 2.17 – Two men begin a conversation that will lead to an implied sexual encounter. Safer Sex Comix #3, Gay Men's Health Crisis Safer Sex Comix, Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum / Art Resource, NY.

Safer Sex Comix #8 gets a little more creative in its depiction of a fairy tale scene where an “Evil Queen” puts a spell on a hunky man that causes “all but one part of him” to sleep. The sleeping man is portrayed with an erect penis and the “queen” is a man in drag. In addition to the humorous and erotic scenes, the comics also provided a great deal of information about AIDS and safe sex that was distributed to organizations across the country.



Figure 2.18 – The Evil Queen seduces her Hunky Prince in this comic. Safer Sex Comix #8, Gay Men's Health Crisis Safer Sex Comix, Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum / Art Resource, NY.

Local gay newspapers began publishing “The Nurse’s Report,” a column penned by King that discussed current gay health concerns, primarily AIDS and safe sex. These articles were a positive and humorous way for gay men to get more information about AIDS. One article advertised Nurse Safe Sexx’s willingness to travel to teach about safe sex and distribute condoms.<sup>73</sup> Another was a transcript of an interview with a sexually active person with AIDS. He [the interviewee] always “plays” safely but acknowledged that many people do not, warning them of the cost.<sup>74</sup> One powerful report was a response to a letter from “Concerned,” a recently diagnosed man who had no idea what to do next.<sup>75</sup> He asked Nurse Safe Sexx: “What is going to happen to me now? Am I going to get AIDS? What is HIV? How do I keep healthy?” Even seven years after the first recorded cases of what became AIDS, people were unsure what a diagnosis meant for them. They were unprepared to receive a positive test result. Nurse Safe Sexx neutralized these fears by relaying that the anonymous letter writer [and others] can have HIV and have sex. They just must “play safely.” “We all need to play safe to protect #1,” wrote Nurse Safe Sexx. “That’s yourself.”<sup>76</sup> The Nurse’s report demonstrated that many people were afraid to talk about AIDS and safe sex without the protection of anonymity, something King’s mother noted in her own experience as Hoosier Mom. Creating a community-driven educational column allowed Nurse Safe Sexx to expand her audience by leveraging anonymity as a means of generating a safe conversational space. Getting

---

<sup>73</sup> Kenn King, “Have Condoms Will Travel,” *The Mirror* 2, no. 17 (May 1987).

<sup>74</sup> Kenn King, “An Interview with a Sexually Active PWA,” *The Mirror* 2, no. 12 (February 1987).

<sup>75</sup> Kenn King, “The Nurses Report,” *The Mirror* 4, no. 3 (October 1988).

<sup>76</sup> Kenn King, “The Nurses Report,” *The Mirror* 4, no. 3 (October 1988).

proper education on safe sex and AIDS decreased stigma and built a safer atmosphere for gay men in Indianapolis.

Nurse Safe Sexx was invited to the National Health Conference in 1986 to demonstrate what community-based organizations were “doing to educate gays about AIDS in a less depressive manner than usual.”<sup>77</sup> Nurse Safe Sexx participated in conferences and workshops in Indiana and across the United States expanding her impact through the use of positive and humorous language. “Nurse Safe Sexx Goes to National Health Conference,” reported *The Mirror* in March of 1986.<sup>78</sup> The seventh national Gay and Lesbian Health Conference and the fourth national AIDS Forum hosted by George Washington University Medical Center in Washington D.C. offered the opportunity for Nurse Safe Sexx to engage with medical professionals directly. The conference goals were to provide the most current information on AIDS, to clarify gay and lesbian health concerns, to educate health professionals, and to inform participants about existing resources and services.<sup>79</sup>

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) quickly recognized the importance of Nurse Safe Sexx. According to King, she was cited as a great example of a successful grassroots safe sex program.<sup>80</sup> The CDC invited Nurse Safe Sexx and the Bag Ladies to several different conferences in Atlanta and Indiana to demonstrate how they saw her as a positive grassroots example. In February of 1987, the “AIDS in the Heartland”

---

<sup>77</sup> Kenn King, “Nurse Safe Sexx Goes to National Health Conference,” *The Mirror* (March 1986): 29.

<sup>78</sup> Kenn King, “Nurse Safe Sexx Goes to National Health Conference,” *The Mirror* (March 1986): 29-30.

<sup>79</sup> Kenn King, “Nurse Safe Sexx Goes to National Health Conference,” *The Mirror* (March 1986): 29.

<sup>80</sup> Kenn King, interview by Kara Chinn, 2019.



Conference hosted by the Indiana State Board of Health and the CDC asked her to co-conduct a workshop, “Safer Sex: What it is, Why It’s Important,” with John Roach of Project AIDS Lafayette and Fred Martich from the CDC in Atlanta.<sup>81</sup> Roach discussed how to talk about safe sex with a potential partner. Martich, limited by his government position, talked about how the CDC defined safe sex practices. Importantly, he was unable actually teach safe sex. With a mostly “mature, heterosexual, professional audience,” Nurse Safe Sexx/ Kenn King opened up honestly to the audience and injected humor into the talk. King told the audience about his past and history with multiple sexual partners and how these were often one-night stands that happened without the use of condoms or knowing if his sexual partners had any STDs. With AIDS as a potential consequence, King was now practicing safe sex. King, as Nurse Safe Sexx, then explained what safe sex was and how it was able to prevent the spread of HIV, AIDS, and other STDs. Using similar language to the cartoons and other Nurse Safe Sexx appearances, she taught the audience how to put condoms on and how to talk about safe sex to gay men. Feedback was positive. Those appreciative of her work told her that “it’s time we become more explicit and graphic in our teaching of safer sex. Many pamphlets and literature are too vague and don’t reach some of the people who we are trying to educate.”<sup>82</sup> Kenn King recalls travelling all over the state and beyond to teach about safe sex as Nurse Safe Sexx.<sup>83</sup> Talking to a wide range of audiences allowed Nurse Safe Sexx to help organizations learn how to teach in an uplifting, humorous, and sex positive way.

---

<sup>81</sup> Kenn King, “AIDS in the Heartland It’s Here, Now What?” *The Mirror* 2, no. 11 (February 1987).

<sup>82</sup> Kenn King, “AIDS in the Heartland It’s Here, Now What?” *The Mirror* 2, no. 11 (February 1987).

<sup>83</sup> Kenn King, interview by Kara Chinn, 2019.

Although Nurse Safe Sexx took much of what she did from other organizations, she is an example of what an organization in a small city located in the Midwest could do as a successful grassroots AIDS educational program. She also illustrates how these campaigns were necessary all over the United States. Similar organizations around the country were provided safe sex information through fun and engaging ways. These organizations were located in some of the largest cities in the country, San Francisco, New York, and Chicago. Each of these cities had large gay communities that became more vocal and recognized during the 1960s and 1970s during the gay and lesbian liberation movements.<sup>84</sup> The San Francisco based organization, The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence began in 1979 with a mission to “promulgate universal joy and expiate stigmatic guilt.”<sup>85</sup> Their initial mission was not safe sex related. According to Ken Bunch/ Sister Adhanarisvara, one of the first Sisters, rather it focused on using the attention they were getting from their use of nun’s habits and whiteface as a “tool for social change, for the change that we want to see.”<sup>86</sup> The AIDS crisis amplified the Sister’s efforts to promote local healthcare that did not stigmatize gay men. Two Sisters, who were also healthcare professionals, are credited with the creation of the first safe sex literature created by gay men for gay men, *Play Fair!*<sup>87</sup>

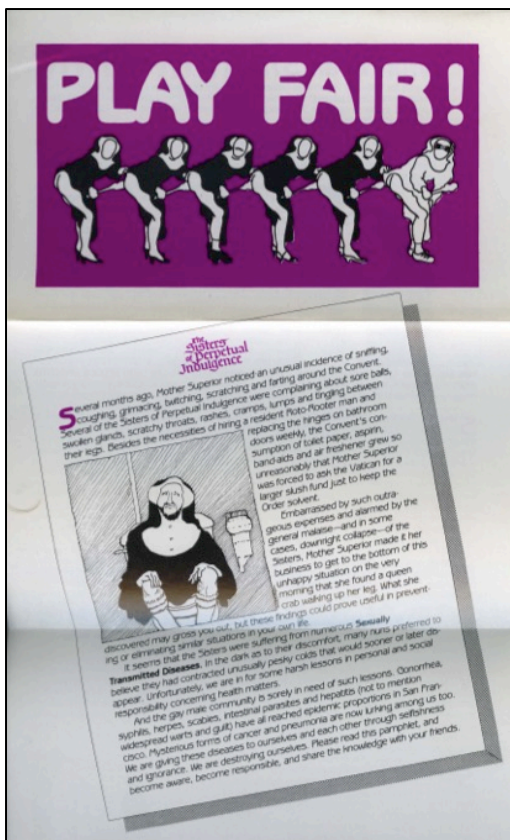
---

<sup>84</sup> John D’Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), 223-239.

<sup>85</sup> Melissa M. Wilcox, *Queer Nuns* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 39.

<sup>86</sup> Melissa M. Wilcox, *Queer Nuns* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 33.

<sup>87</sup> Melissa M. Wilcox, *Queer Nuns* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), 51.



### Mother Superior's Recommendations to Help Create a Disease-Free Convent and Community:

**PLAY FAIR!** If you know—or even suspect—that you have a Sexually Transmitted Disease, don't put other people at risk by engaging in sexual activity. Wait until you KNOW you can cum clean.

**SOAP & WATER.** Wash your hunny little body before and immediately after sexual contact.

**THE AFTER-SEX PEE.** Pee as soon as you can manage it after sexual contact. The sooner the better.

**THE OLD DOUCHE.** Absolutely NOT! Stop douching. It can spread a little infection further inside you, making it a big infection.

**LUBRICANTS.** Buy lubricants free of fancy perfumes, scents, or MSG. The chemicals can irritate your ass.

**COCK RINGS.** Take off your ring when not in use. Some boys can't part with their ring, but it can make the penis swell and cut off circulation to the family jewels.

**CONDOMS.** Condoms actually prevent the spread of certain diseases. If you have a sore or anything on your cock that looks suspicious and you simply must indulge, wear a condom. Don't give whatever you might have to your partner(s).


**NO-NAME SEX.** If one of your partner(s) discovers an infection after you've had sex together and you haven't exchanged names, he probably won't be able to notify you. Try to keep some record of your contacts.

**RIMPING.** Sigh. This is the most dangerous sexual behavior. We have lost more Sisters to the clutches of hepatitis, amoeba, gardnia and other awful diseases. Even the cleanest-looking, most desirable man can have shit full of bacteria and germs. And your tongue in an asshole can slurp up just enough specks of infected shit to make you sorry later. However, Mother Superior gives Sisters in monogamous relationships permission to rim.

**VD TESTING.** If one of your current partners lets you know he has a disease, it's a good idea to get tested for it. In addition, since most Sexually Transmitted Diseases can be contracted without the usual symptoms, today's sexually active gay male should have regular tests for syphilis and gonorrhea (every three months is a good rule of thumb). A monthly self-examination for Kaposi's sarcoma and venereal warts is advisable. Warts are easy and fun to check for by using a mirror or having a friend examine your asshole. Refer to the section on Kaposi's sarcoma for what symptoms to watch out for.

**POPPERS.** Warning: Mother Superior has determined that popper inhalant may be dangerous to your health.

**OBSERVATION.** Check out your man before you lay hands on one another. One Sister even carried a flashlight for these all-too-frequent encounters in the darkness.



**If you have an STD or suspicious symptoms, the following is a list of gay-sensitive places to get diagnosed and/or treated. Numbers following each disease correspond to the appropriate clinic or group. Not all places treat all STDs.**

1. CITY CLINIC, 356 7th St. SF—426-7600	Gonorrhea: 1,2,3,4,7
2. NORTH AVENUE FREE MEDICAL CLINIC, 558 Divisadero St.—431-1714	Syphilis: 1,2,3,4,7
3. HEALTH CENTER #1, 5850 17th St. SF—358-5905	RSV, RSV, 1,2,4,7
4. BERKELEY GAY MEN'S HEALTH COLLECTIVE, 2355 Durant, Berkeley—548-9270	Intestinal Parasites: 5,7,11
5. SF GENERAL HOSPITAL INFECTIOUS DISEASE CLINIC, 1001 Potrero St.—821-6992	Herpes: 1,4
6. SF GENERAL HOSPITAL DERMATOLOGY CLINIC—821-8517	Venereal Warts: 1,2,4,8
7. U.C. MEDICAL CENTER DERMATOL CLINIC, 400 Parnassus St.—466-4602	Scabies: 1,2,3,4,7,9
8. U.C. MEDICAL CENTER ANAL WART CLINIC, 400 Parnassus St.—666-4332	Cable: 1,2,3,4,7
9. CENTRAL EPIDEMIOLOGY, 50 Ivy St.—554-5432	Hepatitis: 5,7,10,12,13
10. BUREAU OF DISEASE CONTROL, 101 Grove St.—558-4046	Kaposi's Sarcoma: 6,15
11. KADDER HOSPITAL, Oakland (screening)—551-4942 (contact Bob Havers)	
12. RESOURCES FOUNDATION (screening), 150 Church St.—464-0500	
13. PETROPOULI COMMUNITY CHURCH (chronic hepatitis support group), 150 Church St.—464-0500 (contact nuns)	
14. HELP FOR HERPES (support group & info), Box 6621, SF 94101—865-9580	
15. U.C. MEDICAL CENTER DERMATOLOGY CLINIC—666-2051	

REFERRAL FOR GAY-SENSITIVE PRIVATE PHYSICIANS: GAY AREA PHYSICIANS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS (GAPHR)—675-5189

**NOTE:** The information in this brochure is relevant to current health needs of the gay male community; it is not intended to relate to the situation for women.

This pamphlet was researched, written and produced by a committee of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, composed of: Sr. Ruth Director (Barbara Quisenberry, R.N.), Sr. Lisa Dogpile (Robert Segal), Sr. Blue Nun (Frank Rivera), Sr. Florence Nightmare (R.N. Bob Campbell, R.N.), Sr. Mary Mole, Sr. Mary Everready, Sr. Norma Peltier, Sr. Jeanne de Jour, Sr. Mary O'Stop, and Sr. Francis Dana. Designed by Sr. Mary Mole.

Special thanks to Gary Ostrom for cartoons, Dr. William Owen for medical consultation, Jim O'Brien and the State of California for funding, Publisher Peter O. Pirsch & Jane Mordell of The Advocate for financial advice and support, Mark Thompson for promotional help, and Anderson Graphics for technical assistance.

**The following businesses, organizations and individuals made publication of this pamphlet possible by their financial contributions. We are indebted to them for their sense of responsibility toward this project for the benefit of public health.**

THE CALDRON MARK TOURS DR. KEITH BARTON	THE ADVOCATE TIMA DR. ROBERT A. BUSH SAN FRANCISCO SEX INSTITUTE	7580 AVENUE BARTIS, Oakland THE STEAMWORKS, Berkeley B-STREET, San Mateo
---	---	--

© 1982 by The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence. Permission to reprint this material will be given by written request to SP, 55 Sutter Street, #770, San Francisco, CA 94104.

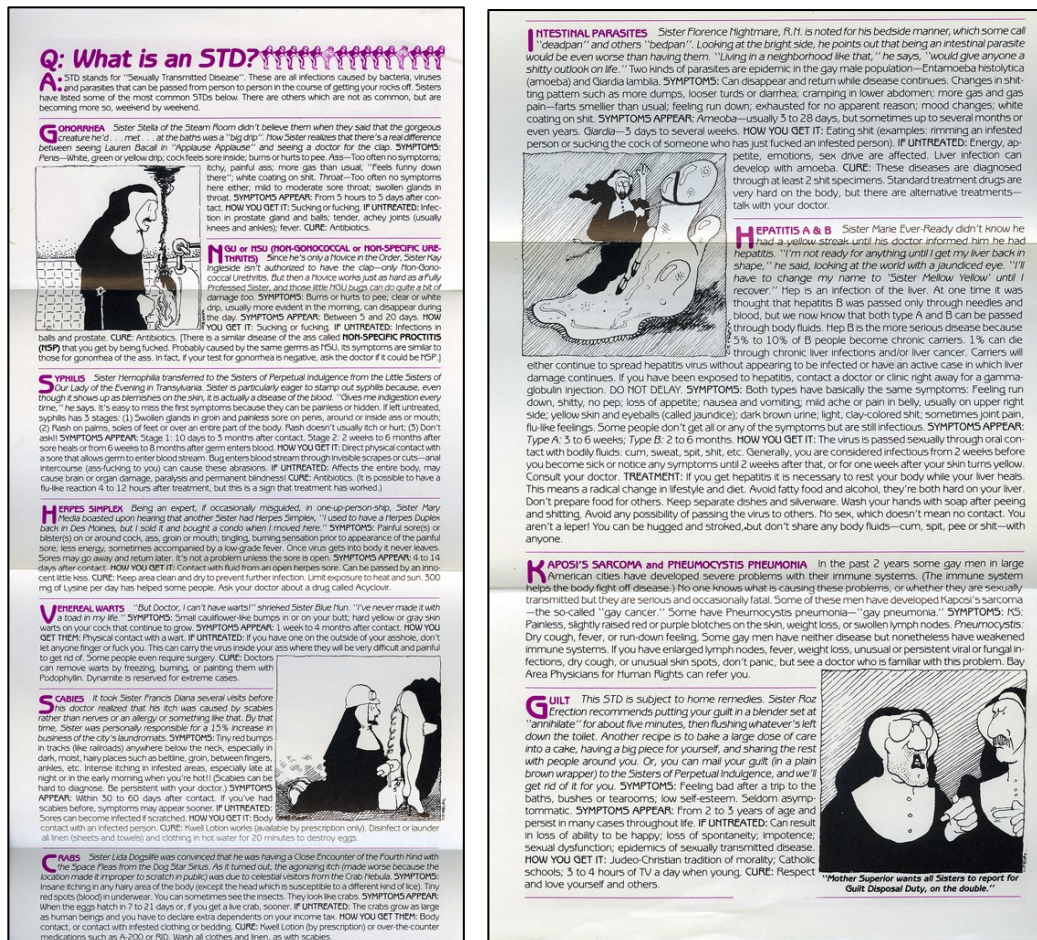


Figure 2.19 – *Play Fair!* was designed before the AIDS crisis. It spoke of keeping one's self safe from common STIs. This type of humorous educational campaign influenced the Indianapolis Bag Ladies. Play Fair pamphlet, the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, 1982. Courtesy of the UCSF Archives & Special Collections, AIDS History Project Ephemeria Collection, MSS 2000-31.

These individuals took what they knew from their medical profession about STIs and transmission and shared it with their own community. Bobbi Campbell (Sister Florence Nightmare) and Ken Bunch (Sister Roz Erektion, earlier Sister Adhanarisvara/Sister Missionary Position) created a catalogue of illnesses that were affecting the gay community. These included Gonorrhea, syphilis, herpes, and "mysterious forms of cancer

and pneumonia” that were “lurking” among them.<sup>88</sup> On a serious note, the *Play Fair!* pamphlet also included a warning that “we are giving these diseases to ourselves and each other through selfishness and ignorance.” The warning came from inside the community cautioning other gay men to be careful because many gay men who were also healthcare professionals had seen the impact of “selfishness and ignorance” in their own patients. Their merged identities gave them a foundation to base their warning on letting other gay men know that there was a solution to stopping the spread of these diseases. The pamphlet also featured a cartoon of “Mother Superior” and her cohort of “frisky nuns with mustaches” as a more humorous way to connect to this message.<sup>89</sup> “When AIDS came along, we shifted the meaning a bit,” said Sister Vish about the organization’s name, “Less on *Indulgence*, more on *Perpetual*. Staying alive to enjoy the fruits of life.” This simple pamphlet was so successful that its distribution took hold all across the United States, including in Indiana.

Print distribution of information was the most significant way word spread about safe sex in the 1980s. A major setback to these efforts arose when Senator Jesse Helms protested a pamphlet sent out by the Gay Men’s Health Crisis in 1987.<sup>90</sup> “After the Gym” was a safe sex comic strip that featured two men, Julio and Ed, who safely worked off the

---

<sup>88</sup> The cancer and pneumonia mentioned in the pamphlet were, at this point, not recognized as the opportunistic infections associated with AIDS.

*Play Fair!* pamphlet, Sister of Perpetual Indulgence, 1982, AIDS History Project Ephemera Collection, UC San Francisco, Library and Special Collections.

<sup>89</sup> Thomas R. Blair, “Safe Sex in the 1970s: Community Practitioners on the Eve of AIDS,” *American Journal of Public Health* 107, no. 6 (June 2017): 875.

<sup>90</sup> Peter Lewis Allen, *The Wages of Sin: Sex and Disease, Past and Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).



adrenaline of a good workout through sex. One caption read: “What happens when Ed, all-star jock stud, meets dark pumpboy, Julio? After the gym, the real workout starts.”

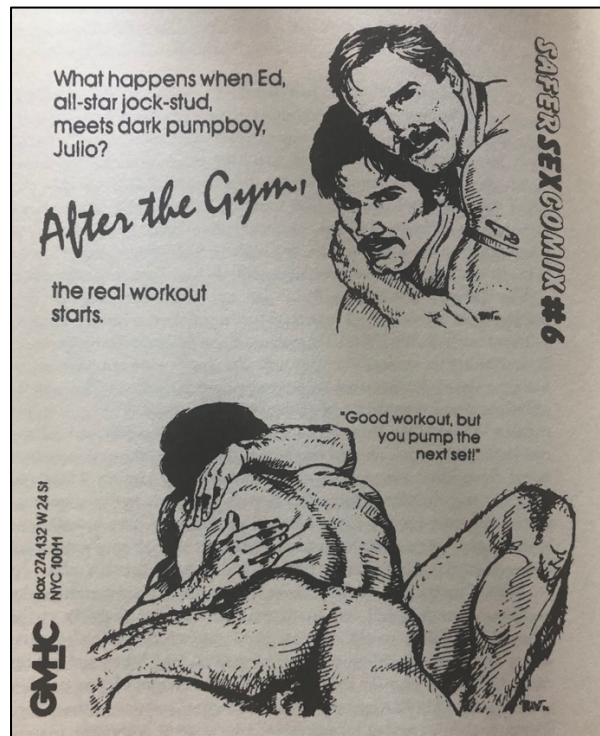


Figure 2.20 – “After the Gym” sparked a debate on the Senate floor about what type of AIDS informational materials could and could not be paid for with government money. “After the Gym” *Safer Sex Comix* no.6, Gay Men’s Health Crisis, ca. 1986.

This comic strip, produced by the Gay Men’s Health crisis in New York, soon became an illustration used by Republican Senator Jesse Helms who took it upon himself to present it to President Reagan. Helms claimed that a portion of the \$600,000 of federal funding given to the Gay Men’s Health Crisis was being used to promote their “homosexual agenda.”<sup>91</sup> “I don’t want to ruin your day,” said Helms to Reagan. “But I feel obliged to hand you this and let you look at what is being distributed under the pretense of AIDS

---

<sup>91</sup> Peter Lewis Allen, *The Wages of Sin: Sex and Disease, Past and Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

education material.”<sup>92</sup> In 1988, Helms attached amendment SP 963 to the huge federal spending bill H.R. 3058.<sup>93</sup> This bill, “Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 1988,” was one that was too difficult for many legislators to refuse. The amendment Helms added to the bill prohibited “the use of [government] funds made available to the Centers of Disease Control to provide AIDS education, information, or prevention materials and activities that promote or encourage homosexual activities.” The bill passed in the Senate with a 94-2 majority. The House of Representatives passed it with a 358-47 majority. Knowing that the general public might take issue with the comic series and other safe sex educational materials, Gay Men’s Health Crisis had intentionally directed public funding toward initiatives that were not sexually charged.<sup>94</sup> Private funding was used to complete projects that would be seen as more controversial, including “After the Gym.” The Helms amendment would have a detrimental impact on organizations that received major funding from all levels of government as it explicitly allowed for censorship.

---

<sup>92</sup> Peter Lewis Allen, *The Wages of Sin: Sex and Disease, Past and Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

<sup>93</sup> “H.R. 3058 – 100<sup>th</sup> Congress: Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services and Education and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 1988,” Congress.gov, 2018, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/100th-congress/house-bill/3058>. This bill allowed these departments to secure funding for different programs. It was difficult for the Senate and the House to agree on this budgeting bill which is why it was hard for legislators to refuse once everything else was settled.

<sup>94</sup> Peter Lewis Allen, *The Wages of Sin: Sex and Disease, Past and Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000). The difference between the “religious right” and a more general conservative community is political activism and alignment with major political action groups.

The Department of Health and Human Services not only provided a large portion of AIDS prevention literature, but also funded many state and local health departments.<sup>95</sup> The vague terminology used in the Helms amendment caused government and private agencies to question, and then censor, all aspects of AIDS prevention campaigns. The CDC, fearing noncompliance, set up boards to determine if posters, pamphlets, or any other printed materials were in violation of the law. This meant they could veto any image or language regarding genitals, safe or unsafe sex, and intravenous drug use.<sup>96</sup> Anal sex as a subject matter, for example, could be cause for censorship, despite the fact that anal intercourse was one of the primary modes of transmission. The Helms amendment contradicted AIDS prevention principles which called for explicit, practical, graphic, or targeted materials to be distributed for the greatest effect. The Institute of Medicine cautioned that “efforts to stifle candid materials may take a toll on human lives.” Today, the Helms amendment is recognized as being responsible for thousands of deaths due to lack of explicit education about safe sex practices while it was law.<sup>97</sup> By 1992, the amendment had been repealed after the Gay Men’s Health Crisis took the Department of Health and Human Services and the Centers for Disease Control to court. GMHC argued that the terms of the CDC’s grant for funding AIDS educational materials were vague especially in the “Basic Principles” section. The 1988 CDC grant application

---

<sup>95</sup> Peter Lewis Allen, *The Wages of Sin: Sex and Disease, Past and Present* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

<sup>96</sup> Content of AIDS-Related Written Materials, Pictorials, Audiovisuals, Questionnaires, Survey Instruments, and Educational Sessions in Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Assistance Programs” Centers for Disease Control, 1992. This is the 1992 revised version of the CDC grant requirements. The original is no longer accessible.

<sup>97</sup> Peter Lewis Allen, *The Wages of Sin: Sex and Disease, Past and Present*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.



followed the terminology used in the Helms Amendment which deterred GMHC from applying for this federal funding for their AIDS educational materials. By 1989, the language in the CDC grant had changed to align with the new “Kennedy/Cranston amendment” in the updated Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 1989 which prohibited funds to be spent on programs that “only” promoted homosexual or heterosexual sexual activity.<sup>98</sup> Although the CDC grant’s basic principles were updated,<sup>99</sup> GMHC sued the CDC and the Department of Health and Human Services saying that restrictions on the grant were in violation of the first and fifth amendments granted by the United States Constitution.<sup>100</sup> Gay Men’s Health Crisis won their case not based on a medical cause but based on an Amendment rights violation.

State run organizations, including the State Department of Health, the AIDS task force, and local non-profits or those that received money from the government were required to censor their educational tools which meant less-effective programs. Responsibility for explicit safe sex education now relied on private funding and private organizations. The Bag Ladies used private donations, not public or government funding which minimized the direct impact of this amendment on their activities; however, the organizations they worked with were not as fortunate. The amount of material that Nurse Safe Sexx could gather from publicly-funded organizations was undoubtedly minimized by the Helms amendment. The amendment lasted until 1992 when it was repealed.

---

<sup>98</sup> *Gay Men’s Health Crisis v. Sullivan*, 733 F. Supp. 619, JUSTIA US Law, 1989.

<sup>99</sup> “Content of AIDS-Related Written Materials, Pictorials, Audiovisuals, Questionnaires, Survey Instruments, and Educational Sessions in Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Assistance Programs” Centers for Disease Control, 1992.

<sup>100</sup> *Gay Men’s Health Crisis v. Sullivan*, 733 F. Supp. 619, JUSTIA US Law, 1989.

The Nurse Safe Sexx program offered an engaging way for Indianapolis gay men to get educated about AIDS and how to prevent transmission. Multiple platforms allowed the message to spread to a wider audience. Cartoons, live performances, posters, and newspaper columns all provided the same message, have safe sex. The impact that Nurse Safe Sexx had on many in the Indianapolis gay community can never be measured, but years after King put away the nurse's uniform men would notice him and let him know that because of his efforts they practiced safe sex and were still alive because of that.

### CHAPTER THREE – BUDDY PROGRAMS: HELPING PEOPLE WITH AIDS

The Indianapolis Bag Ladies were instrumental in establishing programs that directly provided medical care to individuals living with AIDS. The Buddy Support Program and associated Buddy House offered a direct service approach through the use of unlicensed, but medically knowledgeable, staff. Providing compassionate care focusing on the immediate need of their own community members was an essential activity of the Bag Ladies. Although unlicensed, they provided end of life care, emotional support, and housing for men with AIDS in Indianapolis that would transform individual lives and the lives of their families.

Much of what the Bag Ladies instituted was in reaction to national and local health care and end of life care for people with AIDS. National organizations, including ACT UP, were fighting for the development and release of medications that would put an end to HIV and AIDS.<sup>101</sup> Azidothymidine, or AZT, was the first successful treatment for HIV.<sup>102</sup> AZT was first developed by Jerome Horowitz, PhD, as an anti-cancer drug in 1964. Clinical trials proved that it could improve the immune functions of AIDS patients and in 1987 it became the first HIV treatment drug approved by the United States Food and Drug Administration. AZT was not entirely effective on its own, so it was soon combined with other drugs to increase efficacy.<sup>103</sup> Initially, the price of AZT was astronomically high because of the intense demand and low competition. ACT UP actively fought this pricing and successfully negotiated for fair market price because

---

<sup>101</sup> Deborah B. Gould, *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight against AIDS* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009).

<sup>102</sup> Rachel Nall, "The History of HIV and AIDS in the United States," *Healthline*, January 29, 2018. [www.healthline.com/health/hiv-aids/history#1990s-2000s](http://www.healthline.com/health/hiv-aids/history#1990s-2000s).

<sup>103</sup> "The First AIDS Drugs," National Cancer Institute: Center for Cancer Research. [ccr.cancer.org/news/landmarks/article/first-aids-drugs](http://ccr.cancer.org/news/landmarks/article/first-aids-drugs).

pharmaceutical companies were forcing people to spend thousands of dollars a year to stay alive. In 1997, HAART, or highly active antiretroviral therapy became the new treatment standard.

Early in the AIDS crisis, there was little that medical professionals could do to make the lives of their patients better. Before medications were developed and made readily available that made living with HIV possible, people with AIDS suffered from dismal long-term outcomes. Immune systems would gradually weaken as opportunistic infections like pneumonia, Kaposi's Sarcoma, and even the flu flourished. While not every person perished, poor health made it difficult for many to maintain jobs. With the inability to afford housing or medical care due to lack of income, people with AIDS struggled to survive. Some people with AIDS faced intense discrimination from employers, landlords, and medical professionals if their HIV status was revealed.

After the closing of the Gay and Lesbian Health Conference in 1983, a group of people with AIDS outlined 17 principles that established how people with AIDS wanted to be treated by medical professionals and the general public. The short document opened with this bold statement: "We condemn attempts to label us as 'victims,' a term which implies defeat, and we are only occasionally 'patients,' a term which implies passivity, helplessness, and dependence upon the care of others. We are 'People With AIDS.'"<sup>104</sup> The remainder of the document was split into three sections; "Recommendations for All People," "Recommendations for People with AIDS," and "Rights of People with AIDS." The recommendations for all people called for allied support against housing, employment, and medical discrimination due to a positive HIV status and to not

---

<sup>104</sup> The Advisory Committee of the People with AIDS, "The Denver Principles," 1983.

“scapegoat people with AIDS.” The recommendations for people with AIDS were to be active in all levels of decision making and get their voice heard and to have safe, low-risk sex with any and all future partners. The final section, rights of people with AIDS, demanded rights such as the access to quality medical treatment, full explanations of medical services, to privacy, and the right “to die—and LIVE—in dignity.” Although this was an outline of the basic rights all people with AIDS should have received, many healthcare organizations did not comply. A 1987 article in the *New York Times*, “When Doctors Refuse to Treat AIDS,” publicly called out the ignorance behind doctors and dentists who were still refusing to treat people with AIDS.<sup>105</sup> In this article, having been asked why he refused to treat people with AIDS, the chief heart surgeon at a Milwaukee hospital is quoted saying, “I’ve got to think about myself; I’ve got to think about my family. That responsibility is greater than to the patient.” The article’s author was critical of these doctors because, “when even medically trained people ignore medical evidence and succumb to panic, they set a miserable example for others in society who must deal with the disease and its carriers.” In Indianapolis, the spread of misinformation or the misinterpretation of information was all too familiar. Charles E. Ray of Nashville, Indiana wrote to the *Indianapolis News* about his thoughts on AIDS and the gay community. Later reprinted in *The New Works News* with commentary, Ray argued that “the very root of the AIDS problem lies with the homosexual segment of society.”<sup>106</sup> He continued with his idea of a solution to the problem, “I say now it is time to begin quarantine action against homosexuals.” The commentator on the editorial argued that the

---

<sup>105</sup> “When Doctors Refuse to Treat AIDS,” *New York Times*, Aug 3, 1987.

<sup>106</sup> “Quarantine the Homosexuals,” *New Works News* (Indianapolis, IN) 7, no. 1, October 1987. The *New Works News* was a local, Indianapolis-based gay publication.

initial appearance of AIDS in the gay community was a “fluke.” It could have just as easily appeared in other communities of different ethnicities or sexual orientations. Humorously, the commentator added that “if all homosexuals were banished from society (after the three hundred years it would take to decide who they were) that the economy, entertainment industry and most cultural institutions would... collapse.” Ray noted that many of his ideas were from the leader of the Human Immuno-Deficiency Eradication Foundation, Dr. William O’Connor, who argued that not quarantining homosexuals could “ultimately wipe out the human race.”

The Bag Ladies Buddy Support Program and the Buddy House were two initiatives set up by the Bag Ladies in an attempt to help the people around them that were suffering from AIDS. Both programs occasionally worked in partnership with doctors willing to treat the physical and mental symptoms of AIDS but more often than not, the Bag Ladies worked independently to help those in need. These two programs eventually evolved into some of the leading HIV and AIDS programs in Indianapolis.

### **The Buddy Support Program**

The Buddy Support Program was established in 1985 out of the combined effort of Darrell Arthur, a Bag Lady, and Dr. Daniel Hicks, a psychiatrist from Methodist hospital in Indianapolis. Dr. Hicks had begun counseling services for people with AIDS through Methodist hospital earlier that year. Due to a high level of participation, Dr. Hicks paired with Arthur to get his clients the additional help they needed. These were services not provided by the Hospital. They “really needed somebody to help them – get groceries, go get medicine – and a lot of them didn’t have families, so they had to have somebody help them – just check on them every day to make sure they were okay,”

recounted Palmer.<sup>107</sup> Arthur, serving as the Buddy System Program Coordinator, developed programs “to train and assign volunteer Buddies to people with AIDS in order to provide emotional support, to perform practical tasks such as transportation or homemaking assistance, and to provide support to the loved ones of people with AIDS and those grieving their loss.”<sup>108</sup> Applicants were screened before they could attend training to become an official Buddy. An ideal Buddy held several specific characteristics: “personal stability and maturity, non-judgmental attitude, to be open to one’s own feelings and vulnerability, positive response to feedback and supervision, and no underlying emotional/drug/alcohol problems.”

By November 1985 the group had their first class of trained Buddies. Forty trainees, including Bag Ladies Steve Willis and Joe Shierling, spent two days training at Methodist hospital.<sup>109</sup> Before training, each Buddy received a letter welcoming them to the “Bag Lady Buddy Support Program” from Arthur. In this letter, Arthur outlined the basic goals of the program, mentioning how the Buddies would be “an essential part in the effort to make their lives more comfortable. Comfort is our goal... help is our means.” This help would come in the form of “skills of cooking, cleaning, talking,

---

<sup>107</sup> Coby Palmer Oral History and Transcript, 2015, SC 3442, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, 19. Coby Palmer has been actively involved in the Bag Ladies since its founding and recalls many conversations and meetings with Arthur that involved the creation of the Damien Center.

<sup>108</sup> I will use the term “people or person with AIDS” because the Buddy Support program separated “people/person with AIDS” from the “Buddies.” The Buddies are not people with AIDS. In their own writing, the Bag Lady Buddy Support Program used the shorthand PWA when referring to a person with AIDS. Edmond Talucci Oral History Interview and Transcript, 2014, SC 3338, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, 12; “AIDS,” *Indianapolis Star* (Indianapolis, IN), Jan 18, 1987. Bag Ladies Buddy Support Program Documents, ca. 1985-1987, M1157, Box 3, Folder 2, Mark A. Lee LGBT Collection 1981-2014, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, 1.

<sup>109</sup> Edmond Talucci Oral History, interview by Kara Chinn, 2019.

listening, etc.,” but could also include “drivers, grocery shoppers, home visitors... readers, and hand holders.” Arthur then wished for each Buddy that “the training program you are about to enter will help you deal with any concerns of AIDS and you will feel more comfortable in your buddy relationship.”<sup>110</sup> During the two training days, Buddies learned about how they could assist their future partner. This included a “base knowledge relative to AIDS – its prevention, symptomology, epidemiology, diagnosis and treatment as well as significant economic, psychological and social aspects of the illness,” ways in which to help people with AIDS cope with grief, and details and expectations of the Buddy Support Program.<sup>111</sup> Sessions were led by a trained set of medical staff at Methodist hospital. Doctors Hicks, Baker, and Irick along with Jan Scott, a nurse who counseled patients at an anonymous Indiana University Hospital testing site, taught sessions related to medical and emotional care. Other sessions were taught by Lisa Madrid from the Social Services office at Methodist, LuAnn Baker of the Indiana State Board of Health, and J. Pendleton of the Social Security office in Indianapolis.<sup>112</sup> Each Buddy would also attend monthly evening meetings which would “devote a major portion of the meeting to continued in-service training.” These meetings also served as a

---

<sup>110</sup> Bag Ladies Buddy Support Program Documents, ca. 1985-1987, M1157, Box 3, Folder 2, Mark A. Lee LGBT Collection 1981-2014, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis.

<sup>111</sup> Bag Ladies Buddy Support Program Documents, ca. 1985-1987, M1157, Box 3, Folder 2, Mark A. Lee LGBT Collection 1981-2014, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis.

<sup>112</sup> “The Picture: A Needs Assessment and Overview of the Indiana HIV/AIDS Arena” (Indianapolis: The Indiana AIDS Fund, 1996), 39.



place to express concerns, share stories, and provide emotional support for those volunteering in the program.<sup>113</sup>

Buddies were then assigned by Arthur and his small team of supervisors to a person with AIDS. The main factor considered when pairing Buddies was to assess the need of the person with AIDS and match them with a Buddy that had the “perceived capability” to meet those needs. “A host of other ‘reality’ factors may be considered, such as the respective sex of the Buddy and PWA [persons with AIDS], geographic distances, life styles, etc.” Initially, each person with AIDS was assigned two Buddies whose responsibility it was to arrange schedules between themselves and the person with AIDS to “insure consistency in their support of the PWA.”

Assisting a person with AIDS during medical visits was a primary function of the Buddy. Buddies were encouraged to attend doctor or hospital visits with the person with AIDS to not only help transport but to be an advocate for the patient.<sup>114</sup> Many of the area hospitals were aware of the Buddy Support Program and supportive of it. If a person with AIDS was hospitalized, Buddies were responsible for letting hospital staff know that they were part of the program and to ask if there was anything they could do to help. Buddies were instructed on how to handle the tough situation of criticizing the care of the person with AIDS. Explicitly told to avoid an “aggressive or demanding approach” to advocating better care for the person with AIDS, Buddies were encouraged to be “firm

---

<sup>113</sup> Bag Ladies Buddy Support Program Documents, ca. 1985-1987, M1157, Box 3, Folder 2, Mark A. Lee LGBT Collection 1981-2014, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, 9.

<sup>114</sup> Bag Ladies Buddy Support Program Documents, ca. 1985-1987, M1157, Box 3, Folder 2, Mark A. Lee LGBT Collection 1981-2014, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis.

but courteous” when “registering complaints and concerns.” Above all, Buddy contact with any medical professional was to be approved by the person with AIDS. Review of medical records on the part of the Buddy was only to be done in emergency situations and only after the “PWA has been apprised of what information is needed and how it will be used, and only after the PWA has given his/her permission.” The connection of Buddies and people with AIDS created a community that allowed people with AIDS to regain some of their autonomy and encouraged them to get connected to a support system that they could depend on.

### **The Buddy House**

The Buddy House, a housing facility for individuals living with AIDS, was established in Indianapolis by Kenn E. King and Edmond Talucci in April 1986 with the primary purpose of providing housing for people with AIDS so they could receive live-in care.<sup>115</sup> An advisory committee was recruited by King who intentionally sought the help of health officials, business leaders, and clergy.<sup>116</sup> He wanted a cross-section of the community represented and providing advice so that the residents could get the best care possible. Before beginning the house and moving residents in, King and Talucci attended a seminar in Washington D. C. where they were able to seek advice of people like Reverend Harold J. Burris, who ran five homes or apartment buildings in Washington D.C. The Buddy House home itself was donated by a local Indianapolis business man, Rick Buele. The Bag Ladies were “just paying the rent” for this house located on the east

---

<sup>115</sup> “AIDS,” *Indianapolis Star* (Indianapolis, IN), Jan 18, 1987.

<sup>116</sup> “Buddy House Becomes Home for AIDS Victims,” *The Star Press* (Muncie, IN), Jan 19, 1987.

side of Indianapolis.<sup>117</sup> Buddy House residents were required to be able to care for themselves or be able to arrange hospice care or home health care.<sup>118</sup> Due to zoning laws, the Bag Ladies were not able to actually provide any care for those living in the house. Residents needed to help out with chores and were asked to pay a rent of about one quarter of their income.<sup>119</sup> If their condition worsened, or if they needed to check in to a hospital, however, they were not turned out. Hospice-care provided by Methodist and St. Vincent Hospitals was available at the house. Dr. Neil Warick, medical director of the hospice program at Methodist praised the Buddy House noting that “so often, patients lose so much of the financial support they have had.”<sup>120</sup> Located on the near east side of Indianapolis near Brookside Park, people were encouraged to keep its location a secret out of fear that they would be harassed. Although attitudes towards what many still considered the “gay disease” were beginning to change, there was a general sense by King that “those in the house deserved privacy and the chance to seek emotional support.”<sup>121</sup> He and Talucci feared that if people in the neighborhood discovered there was a place housing people with AIDS there might be retaliation. Talucci saw that as many people were dying, their residents would not be in the house for long. Buddy House

---

<sup>117</sup> Coby Palmer Oral History, interview by Kara Chinn, 2019. Edmond Talucci Oral History, interview by Kara Chinn, 2019.

<sup>118</sup> Home health care is a wide range of services that are given in the home to treat illness or injury. It is often cheaper and more convenient than care that can be received in a hospital. Hospice care is for those who are terminally ill and is end-of-life care designed to relieve pain and other symptoms of illness. Although the Buddy House was originally intended to allow people to live out the rest of their lives, the program was so short lived that most people were asked to relocate once the house closed.

<sup>119</sup> If they could not pay, they were not removed from the house.

<sup>120</sup> “AIDS,” *Indianapolis Star* (Indianapolis, IN), Jan 18, 1987.

<sup>121</sup> “Buddy House Becomes Home for AIDS Victims,” *The Star Press* (Muncie, IN), Jan 19, 1987.

expected a quick turnover of residents. The Buddy House could accommodate five to six people at a time and was home to eleven people in its less than nine months of operation.<sup>122</sup>

This “noble experience,” as Talucci reminisces, only lasted a short nine months because it was too much for the Bag Ladies to handle.<sup>123</sup> Many of the residents were people that Talucci describes as having “made poor decisions” including “drug users, hustlers, and street people” who were taking advantage of the generosity of the Bag Ladies. Several residents were asked to leave the Buddy House because of their actions and inability to follow the house rules. Residents would also hold loud parties and cause trouble with their neighbors. Talucci feared that if there was heavy police involvement that he, as acting president of the Bag Ladies, would be held responsible for their actions. This concern was shared by others in leadership. Ultimately, the Buddy House was closed. Residents were asked to find housing elsewhere.

Parkview Manor became the second Indianapolis home for people with AIDS and HIV. Randy Prock, president of Cloverleaf Healthcare Services based out of New York, “took note of the alarming spread of the disease and foresaw the growing need for an AIDS care facility in the Midwest.”<sup>124</sup> On April 10, 1990, Parkview Manor, a renovated nursing home owned by Cloverleaf Healthcare Services, opened its doors to people with AIDS. As a for-profit endeavor, Parkview Manor differed from the Buddy House, however, similarly, it provided housing and services to people with AIDS in Indiana.

---

<sup>122</sup> Edmond Talucci Oral History, interview by Kara Chinn 2019.

<sup>123</sup> Edmond Talucci Oral History, interview by Kara Chinn 2019.

<sup>124</sup> Kathleen Martin, “A Place to Live: AIDS Patients Find Care and Solitude at Renovated Nursing Home,” *The Indianapolis New Times* (Indianapolis, IN), December 1990.

Located on the north side of 46<sup>th</sup> Street near Keystone, Parkview Manor was licensed to care for a maximum of 39 patients. Residents had to be 18 years old or older. Fred Moon, Parkview's Chief Administrator, noted that "generally, by the time they [people with AIDS] reach Parkview Manor, they need some nursing care observation, medication, medical services . . . they might need some therapies." Many residents participated in the Buddy Program while living at Parkview.

Through the Buddy Support Program and the Buddy House, the Bag Ladies provided care and compassion to people with AIDS in Indianapolis. Although they were untrained and unlicensed care givers, they saw a need in their own community and they stepped up to fill that gap. Many people with AIDS needed emotional, mental, and physical assistance when it came to dealing with their illnesses. The Bag Ladies were able to provide housing, end of life care, and emotional and physical help to members of their own community. This type of direct service has left a legacy of how other organizations were able to adopt similar programs and continue to help people with AIDS and HIV.

## CHAPTER FOUR – THE DAMIEN CENTER: RELIGION AND AIDS IN INDIANAPOLIS

The late 1970s and 1980s in America saw the rise of the Religious Right and conservative political and cultural factions. This period focused on a rejection of the previous decades including the ideas of free love and sexual freedom.<sup>125</sup> The Religious Right was a “loose network of political actors, religious organizations, and political pressure groups” that made broad religious appeals to Americans, one of which was the return to “traditional” family values that hinged on a heterosexual nuclear family with traditional moral standards and discipline.<sup>126</sup> Secular and materialistic trends in American culture were perceived by religious and conservative leaders as the moral decline of the nation. Several religious activist coalitions of Catholics, Mormons, Protestants, and Jews fought over social issues concerning sexual morality including resisting abortion rights, combating pornography, and fighting against rights for homosexual people.<sup>127</sup>

The religious response to AIDS manifested in two opposing directions, united in rejecting the “homosexual lifestyle.” One response, which came from the Religious Right, was represented by Jerry Falwell, leader of the Moral Majority. Falwell publicly pointed to AIDS as yet another reason to condemn homosexuality. “AIDS is not just God’s punishment for homosexuals,” Falwell said. “It is God’s punishment for the society that tolerates homosexuals.”<sup>128</sup> These religiously based political action groups

---

<sup>125</sup> Daniel K. Williams, *God’s Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>126</sup> Michael J. McVicar, “The Religious Right in America,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* (March 2016): 1.

<sup>127</sup> Michael J. McVicar, “The Religious Right in America,” *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* (March 2016): 2.

<sup>128</sup> Anthony M. Petro, *After the Wrath of God: AIDS, Sexuality, and American Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 24; Daniel K. Williams, *God’s Own Party: The*

saw AIDS as a deserved punishment to people who lived a homosexual lifestyle. As a consequence, those who had the disease did not deserve care.

The other response to AIDS was by mainstream religious organizations who called for care and compassion towards people with AIDS. They believed care and compassion was their humanitarian and Christian duty. Mother Theresa, a Catholic nun and Nobel Peace Prize winner for her work with the poor and sick in Calcutta, opened her own hospice care center, “Gifts of Love,” in 1985 in Greenwich Village to care for AIDS patients. She hoped that people with AIDS “will be able to live and die in peace by getting tender love and care.”<sup>129</sup> She was greatly praised for her actions towards people with AIDS even with the connection to the gay community.<sup>130</sup> Some Christians followed the example set forth by Mother Teresa and began to see the need to help people with AIDS through the lens of a humanitarian effort by helping the sick and dying.

Father Thomas Stahel pointed out the canonical conflict for Catholic charities: how to promote a Christian attitude of compassion and charity towards the gay community without also saying that homosexual behavior was acceptable.<sup>131</sup> In 1987, the

---

*Making of the Christian Right* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). The Moral Majority was a political action group formed in 1979 to further conservative and religious agendas that included the allowance of prayer in schools and the creation of strict laws against abortion. Formed by Baptist minister Jerry Falwell, this organization played key roles in getting conservative republicans into office during the 1980s. The organization dissolved in the late 1980s.

<sup>129</sup> Lanny L., “When Mother Teresa Opened an AIDS Hospice in Greenwich Village,” Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation Blog, December 24, 2018; “Mother Teresa Offers Help to AIDS Patients,” *Catholic New York* (October 31, 1985).

<sup>130</sup> Adam Nagourney and Marcia Kramer, “Yule Gift! Prison Frees 3 with AIDS,” *New York Daily News* (December 25, 1985): 75; “AIDS Inmates to be Sent to Nun,” *The Post-Star* (January 7, 1986): 3; “State May Expand Mother Teresa’s AIDS Program,” *The Evening Times* (January 7, 1986): 12.

<sup>131</sup> Anthony M. Petro, *After the Wrath of God: AIDS, Sexuality, and American Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 2.

Administrative Board of the U.S. Catholic Conference released a lengthy document on the position of the church on helping people with AIDS. The language used in “The Many Faces of AIDS: A Gospel Response” demonstrates how the Catholic Church saw their responsibility during this crisis.<sup>132</sup> Members of the church were called to have compassion towards people with AIDS including providing the best and most up-to-date medical care. Discrimination and violence against those with AIDS was unjust and immoral. The U.S. Bishops were called to explain a “clear presentation of Catholic moral teaching concerning human intimacy and sexuality,” which was to be expressed in a way that would “resemble God’s love in being loving, faithful, and committed.” This commitment was heterosexual marriage. Although the Catholic Church, similar to many other Christian denominations, was called to humanitarian compassion, they saw the solution to the AIDS crisis very differently than gay communities. The Catholic Church saw AIDS as both a viral and moral crisis. Its spread could be fought by changing human behavior in order to realign with the specific moral code determined by the church itself.<sup>133</sup> The church argued, if faithful heterosexual relations occurred within the bounds of marriage, the virus would stop spreading.

In Indianapolis, the first large scale care center for people with AIDS was the Damien Center, which opened in 1987. Its history demonstrates how a group of gay men and several religious organizations attempted to put their differences aside to fight for a common goal. The Damien Center was the longest sustained and most influential medical

---

<sup>132</sup> “Called to Compassion and Responsibility: A Response to the HIV/AIDS Crisis,” *Origins: CNS Documentary Service* 19, no. 26 (November 1989): 423.

<sup>133</sup> Anthony M. Petro, *After the Wrath of God: AIDS, Sexuality, and American Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 6.



project of the Indianapolis Bag Ladies. The center was named after a late 1800s Roman Catholic Priest Joseph Damien De Veuster who dedicated his life to caring for the lepers who were banished to the island of Molokai, Hawaii. The Damien Center aimed to replicate his work by caring for those with AIDS and showing compassion.<sup>134</sup> It was brought to fruition through an unlikely team, the Indianapolis Bag Ladies represented by Darrell Arthur, the Roman Catholic Archdiocese represented by Monsignor Gettlefinger and Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Cathedral, and the Episcopal Diocese of Indianapolis represented by Reverend Earl Connor at Christ Church Episcopal Church.<sup>135</sup> The Center provided testing, coordinated care for people with HIV and AIDS, housed a food pantry, and more for people with AIDS in Indianapolis.

Arthur had been struggling to make this facility a reality for years before its launch.<sup>136</sup> He knew that the Catholic Archdiocese owned a building once used as Cathedral Grade School located at 1350 N. Pennsylvania Street.<sup>137</sup>

---

<sup>134</sup> Janet Hastings, "Damien Center place for help, comfort," *Indianapolis News* (Indianapolis, IN), Feb. 9, 1988.

<sup>135</sup> Carol Elrod, "Center comes to rescue to fight Stigma of AIDS," *Indianapolis Star* (Indianapolis, IN), Jun 4, 1988.

<sup>136</sup> Coby Palmer Oral History and Transcript, 2015, SC 3442, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, 28.

<sup>137</sup> Janet Hastings, "Damien Center faces AIDS Crisis," *Indianapolis News* (Indianapolis, IN), Jul 22, 1987.



Figure 4.1 – The original location for the Damien Center was owned by the Catholic Archdiocese of Indianapolis. Damien Center on Pennsylvania Street, Photo by author.

With the assistance of Reverend Earl Connor, Arthur convinced the Catholic Archdiocese to let them use the facility.<sup>138</sup> The Damien Center officially opened in June of 1987 housing four AIDS- related community groups including the Buddy Support Program, People with AIDS Coalition Newsletter, Marion County AIDS Task force, and the Bag Ladies, Inc.<sup>139</sup> Their official purpose stated that “the Damien Center provides and coordinates services for persons living with or affected by HIV and AIDS in our community and actively advocates for just and compassionate responses to their needs.”<sup>140</sup> In addition to care coordination, the Damien Center also provided AIDS patient and family support groups and a library of educational tools. By 1989, the Damien Center hosted eight different support groups, each focused on a different aspect of how the AIDS crisis was affecting people. These included a HIV+ women’s support group,

---

<sup>138</sup> Edmond Talucci Oral History, interview by Kara Chinn, 2019. This location would prove to be the perfect first home for the organization for almost fifteen years.

<sup>139</sup> Janet Hastings, “Damien Center faces AIDS Crisis,” *Indianapolis News* (Indianapolis, IN), Jul 22, 1987. Articles of Incorporation, Secretary of State Non-profit establishment form, Damien Center Collection, Catholic Archdiocese of Indianapolis Archives.

<sup>140</sup> Articles of Incorporation of the Damien Center Inc., Damien Center Collection, Catholic Archdiocese of Indianapolis Archives.

family support group, pastoral counseling, and AA meetings.<sup>141</sup> Arthur served as the Director of Support Services in charge of the support groups as well as the Buddy Program. Each of these services were provided without consideration for the participant's ability to pay. It was the first organization for centralized care and services for those affected with HIV and AIDS in Indianapolis. The Bag Ladies focused much of their fundraising efforts towards the Damien Center and served as its first volunteers.

The leadership of the Damien Center was established in its early bylaws. The Board would be comprised of at least one member from each of the founding organizations. Although the bylaws explicitly stated that these founding organizations were only the Catholic Archdiocese and Christ Church Cathedral, a member of the Bag Ladies also sat on the board for much of Damien Center history. Both Reverend Connor and Monsignor Gettlefinger sat on the initial board. The board was responsible for making most of the long-term decisions for the center. The Bag Ladies Buddy Support Program was turned over to the Damien Center when it opened in 1987 with Arthur as the Program Coordinator.<sup>142</sup>

The DEFA fund, the Direct Emergency Financial Assistance fund, created by the Health Foundation of Greater Indianapolis in the late 1990s, provided financial assistance to Hoosiers living with HIV/AIDS in emergency situations. This fund had originally been a part of the Buddy Support Program and where much of the Bag Ladies' fundraising had funneled into. Funds distributed ensured direct care management and assistance through

---

<sup>141</sup> Damien Center revised Bylaws June 20, 1989, Damien Center Collection Catholic Archdiocese of Indianapolis Archives.

<sup>142</sup> "The Picture: A Needs Assessment and Overview of the Indiana HIV/AIDS Arena" (Indianapolis: The Indiana AIDS Fund, 1996), 39.

the Damien Center, Eskenazi Hospital, and the LifeCare program at IU Health.<sup>143</sup> The position and responsibilities of buddies were transitioned to care coordinators at the Damien Center. Arthur encouraged the Catholic Church to pursue other healthcare programs for people with AIDS but ultimately was unable to see them to creation. One idea was to open additional housing centers that would have functioned for the same purpose as the Buddy House.<sup>144</sup> An extended care facility was desired because many AIDS patients had been staying in hospitals for months due to lack of housing. Families and landlords would force them out. Nursing homes also refused to take AIDS patients for fear of the disease. A Meals on Wheels program was desired to help those who could not make it to the grocery store.

The relationship between the Damien Center and the church began to sever following a disagreement over condoms in 1992. Condoms were the best method to prevent the transmission of HIV as well as other STDs; yet, the Damien Center did not permit condoms to be passed out openly on the center's premises due to its relationship with the Catholic Church. Condoms, like all contraceptives, were frowned upon by the Church. Condoms did not promote a traditional family lifestyle of sex exclusively inside marriage and for the purpose of procreation. In 1968, Pope Paul VI argued that "marriage and conjugal love are by their nature ordained toward the procreation and education of children. Children are really the supreme gift of marriage and contribute in the highest

---

<sup>143</sup> "HIV/ AIDS Emergency Assistance," The Health Foundation of Greater Indianapolis, Inc., 2018, <https://thfgi.org/funding-priorities/hivaids-emergency-assistance/>. Coby Palmer Oral History and Transcript, 2015, SC 3442, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, 19.

<sup>144</sup> Carol Elrod, "Center comes to rescue to fight Stigma of AIDS," *Indianapolis Star* (Indianapolis, IN), Jun 4, 1988.

degree to their parents' welfare."<sup>145</sup> Condoms and other forms of artificial birth control went against this argument. They were not condoned at the Damien Center, in part because of the erroneous belief that contraceptives promoted sexual promiscuity.

The controversy over condom distribution by the Damien Center arose after Father David Coats, a member of the Damien Center board, saw condoms being distributed at the Indiana Black Expo exhibit sponsored by the center's Project Outreach. Temporarily halting the distribution of condoms as a result of Coat's concern, Damien Center staff warned the board that a policy banning condoms could "limit the important ministry of the Damien Center staff to prevent HIV infection through education." During a three-hour-long board meeting, some attendees suggested that the only way for the center to maintain its vital community role was to cut ties with the Catholic Church.<sup>146</sup> The Indianapolis Catholic community agreed with Father Coats that distribution of condoms on Damien Center grounds should not be allowed. They wrote to the church expressing their opinions on the 1992 vote to allow condoms to be passed out during Damien Center sponsored programs as long as they were off site. Mike Vollmer, an administrator at St. Francis Hospital in Beech Grove, wrote to Father Coats supporting his decision to support the "doctrine of the Catholic Church" regarding condoms during an earlier board meeting.<sup>147</sup> Diane Orr, a parishioner at St. Andrew the Apostle Catholic Church wrote to Father Coats to "applaud [him] on the strength and courage [he] has

---

<sup>145</sup> *Humanae Vitae*, A Letter from Pope Paul VI to the Catholic Church Regarding Procreation, 25 July 1968.

<sup>146</sup> Andrea Neal, "Condom Distribution Resumes," *Indianapolis Star* (August 12, 1992): 8.

<sup>147</sup> Mike Vollmer, letter to Father David Coats, September 9, 1992, Damien Center Collection, Catholic Archdioceses of Indianapolis Archives.

shown in this matter.” She was appalled at seeing young children grab condoms at the Indiana Black Expo and believed that they were “living in a time when our morals and faith beliefs are being tested.”<sup>148</sup> The vote to allow condom distribution at the Damien Center passed with an 8-7 ruling by the board, but it called into question the relationship of the Center to the Catholic Church.<sup>149</sup>

Aware of the thriving underground community for goods like AIDS medications and condoms, Ed Talucci remembers being disappointed that the gay community was attempting to place demands on the Catholic church. “Don’t bite the hand that’s feeding you,” he noted. Under the direction of Monsignor Gettlefinger, the Catholic Church had provided a facility and renovated it. Talucci saw that as a major blessing and believed it was “silly” that something as simple as condoms was going to take that facility away.<sup>150</sup> Both Project Outreach and the Indiana HIV Advocacy Program wished to move from the church-controlled facility because they saw the importance of connecting counseling to condom distribution.<sup>151</sup> Executive Director of the Damien Center Gordon Chastain knew the center would suffer if these programs were housed elsewhere. The issue ultimately caused the Damien Center, and the other AIDS service organizations, to move to a facility not controlled by the Catholic Church allowing them to carry out business as they saw fit.

---

<sup>148</sup> Diane Orr, letter to Father David Coats, August 12, 1992, Damien Center Collection, Catholic Archdioceses of Indianapolis Archives.

<sup>149</sup> Andrea Neal, “Condom Distribution Resumes,” *Indianapolis Star* (August 12, 1992): 1.

<sup>150</sup> Edmond Talucci Oral History Interview and Transcript, 2014, SC 3338, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, 13-14.

<sup>151</sup> Rebecca Bibbs, “Damien Center Fate Uncertain,” *The Indianapolis News* (August 12, 1992): E-1.

The Damien Center project proved that a symbiotic relationship could be created between the gay communities and the religious communities. Counter to the larger historical narrative, several religious organizations in Indianapolis were willing to help people with AIDS through the lens of a humanitarian effort. With the combined efforts of the Bag Ladies, the Roman Catholic Archdiocese, and the Episcopal Diocese of Indianapolis, the Damien Center was able to open and begin providing desperately needed healthcare services to those suffering from HIV and AIDS. Without this initial partnership, the Damien Center would not have been able to begin its ministry as early as it did. The relationship between the Damien Center and the Churches ended in 2006. The Damien Center was rehoused at 26 North Arsenal Avenue in Indianapolis that same year and continues, at the time of this writing, to be one of the cornerstone organizations for HIV and AIDS healthcare in Indianapolis.<sup>152</sup>



Figure 4.2 – Following a move in 2006, the Damien Center was housed in this location on Arsenal Avenue. Photo by author.

---

<sup>152</sup> Ruth Holliday, “For Those with HIV, Center is a Lifesaver,” *The Indianapolis Star* (Indianapolis, IN), Jan 12, 2006.

## **CHAPTER FIVE – “DRAGTIVISM” AT THE INDIANA HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

The mission of the Indiana Historical Society is to be “Indiana’s Storyteller, connecting people to the past by collecting preserving and sharing the state’s history.” In 2015 the Indiana Historical Society initiated a LGBTQ collecting initiative in an attempt to fill a gap in their collection. Collecting LGBTQ history is an important step forward in telling a more diverse narrative of the state. Since the initiative began, the Indiana Historical Society has been able to collect a vast array of items such as photographs, posters, oral histories, newspapers, personal papers, organizational records, and more. At the time of this writing, the Indiana Historical Society is continuing to actively collect and preserve LGBTQ history. Through this collecting initiative, the Indiana Historical Society has established two exhibits (one traveling exhibit and one temporary exhibit) and hosted a drag history panel discussion. The collecting initiative, programs, and exhibits demonstrates how the Indiana Historical Society is joining the trend in broadening its narrative to include LGBTQ histories.

As part of the IUPUI Public History Graduate Program Thesis requirements, I had the option of designing a Public History element that related to my overall written thesis. I took this opportunity to design and host a public program at the Indiana Historical Society. This program expands upon the themes and ideas discussed in the larger written thesis. The Bag Ladies represent one portion of the LGBTQ communities in Indianapolis and Indiana. They established themselves as an open and outspoken group that sought to fight HIV and AIDS as well as the stigma around the disease. The program I designed



showcases the Bag Ladies and other organizations to explore how they use drag and similar performances to uplift portions of the LGBTQ communities.

On June 19, 2019, the Indiana Historical Society hosted a public program called “Dragtivism.”<sup>153</sup> This event brought together The Bag Ladies, Low Pone, Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, and Brothers United, who have all used drag or similar performances as a platform for activism to create social change in the lives of the members of the different communities they represent. The four organizations were chosen because they each represent a different portion of Indiana’s LGBTQ communities and because their activist missions promote different ideas. The intention of the program was to not only demonstrate the activist missions of each of these organizations but to also introduce the organizations and their work to people who may be unfamiliar with what they do. This public program grew out of the research for this thesis and is its public history component.



Figure 5.1 – This flyer was one of the several versions of promotional material created by the Indiana Historical Society and was used by all partner organizations to support the

<sup>153</sup> From August 2018 – August 2019, I worked at the Indiana Historical Society as an intern in the Education and Community Engagement department which is the team that organizes and hosts all public programming at the Indiana Historical Society. This event was a project that I organized and hosted.

program. Indiana Historical Society Promotional Material for “Dragtivism,” Created by author.

Drag is traditionally defined as a performance where people, usually male, dress up as the opposite sex in highly stylized ways. Today, this definition is being challenged as people of all gender identities dress in different types of gender, and non-gender, expressions.<sup>154</sup> Represented in this program are three types of drag; camp drag, parody drag, and queer drag. LGBTQ communities have used other types of performance in a similar way, and for this program we focused on vogue dance. Vogue dance is a highly skilled form of dance that features model-like poses in combination with angular, linear, and rigid arm, leg, and body dance movements. Vogue was designed as a style of dance that can be used to tell a story. While planning this program, diversity and inclusion were an intentional part in choosing which organizations to partner with. Intentionally telling an inclusive narrative gives a deeper meaning to the history being shared. As I considered partner organizations, I wanted to represent a larger spectrum of the LGBTQ communities. Not all people in these communities have the same experiences, rather, they are extremely varied, and it was important to me and the success of the program to include these varied experiences.

### **The Partner Organizations: A Brief History**

The four partner organizations that participated in Dragtivism are the Bag Ladies, Low Pone, The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, and Brothers United.<sup>155</sup> Each

---

<sup>154</sup> “Understanding Drag,” National Center for Transgender Equality, April 28, 2017. <https://transequality.org/issues/resources/understanding-drag>.

<sup>155</sup> Unfortunately, Brothers United was not able to participate in the event because of their inability to get volunteers to participate in the performance. Although they did not perform, I am still including them in the program plan discussion because they were important in the narrative and argument I am creating with this program.

organization comes with their own rich historical background that has influenced how they participate in their communities. As I was considering who to highlight in this program, I intentionally looked for diverse organizations when it comes to the portions of the LGBTQ communities they represent and a diversity in mission. Each organization was also invited to participate due to their reputation in the LGBTQ communities as those of organizations that are currently creating change and advocating for themselves and others. The history of The Bag Ladies has already been told through this thesis; a brief introduction to the other organizations demonstrates the diversity, creativity, and individuality they bring to the stage.

Low Pone began in February of 2017 with a once a month queer dance party at Pioneer, 1110 Shelby Street, in Fountain Square in Indianapolis. The monthly dance parties include drag, dancing, and music to celebrate the queer communities in Indianapolis. They aim to reunite and re-engage the queer communities through creativity and individuality in spaces that everyone can feel welcome and comfortable. The event is hosted by drag queens Mary Fagdalane and Stevie Dicks.

Low Pone was founded by Carrie Keel who had seen pop-up queer dance parties in other cities and decided to create one in Indianapolis. Keel had noted two local drag queens, Mary Fagdalane and Auntie Christ, who performed a different style of drag that did not fit into the traditional drag performed in Indianapolis.<sup>156</sup> Keel invited them to become the first hosts of Low Pone to provide a space for non-traditional drag

---

<sup>156</sup> The traditional style of drag in Indianapolis was female impersonation, where men dressed up as women and attempted to emulate female characteristics.

performers. The organization brings in drag performers from all over the country, especially those known for being subversive in the drag community.

Low Pone has expanded beyond their once a month party to include programs such as “Crashing Through the Front Door” a book-length photo and essay project, all-ages event series Minor Sweat, and a music festival BUZZ/cut. The organization has thrived since its recent founding but has kept true to the mission of providing a space for all members of the queer community. They actively provide a space for young queer individuals to gather, perform, and feel a sense of community.

The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence began their mission to “promulgate universal joy and expiate stigmatic guilt” in the fall of 1979 after attending the first International Faerie gathering in San Francisco. Their founders, Sister Vicious PHB, Reverend Mother, Sister Missionary Position and Sister Hysterectoria, donned full, traditional habits to challenge conformity in San Francisco. Their signature Flemish 14th-century habits and white face gained instant recognition.

By 1981, sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS were spreading in San Francisco, creating fear and panic. Two of the Sisters were also registered nurses, Sister Roz Erection and Sister Florence Nightmare. They used their dual identities to create *Play Fair!* – the first safer sex pamphlet created in the world. It provided helpful advice and humor to encourage gay men to reduce risk and prevent disease transmission. Today, there are 65 houses across the world each with their own habits, cultures and rules that reflect their community.

The Indiana Crossroads Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence began in 2014 by Sister Nova Aggra and the organization has flourished since. They have devoted themselves to

community service and outreach to those on the edges of society, promoting human rights, respecting diversity, and spiritual enlightenment.

Brothers United was founded in Indianapolis by African American gay men in 1987 as a community-based organization, providing HIV/STD awareness, education and prevention services. In the beginning, members met in each other's basements to discuss how to help protect their community members against AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. The organization focuses their efforts on the Black and Latinx members of the LGBTQ communities. Brothers United continues to aim to be the leader in public health programs and initiatives for multicultural communities in the Midwest. It is the largest African American AIDS service organization in Indiana, offering a wide variety of programs that include advocacy, prevention services and support through local partnerships.

One of their advocacy programs is the Red Ribbon Rumble HIV Prevention Program that targets the house/ballroom scene. The house/ballroom scene is an underground population within the Black LGBT community and is often comprised of young, ostracized gay and transgender youth who have created close bonds with their "house" families. House families are a tradition in the ball community where people who have been ostracized from their biological families come together and create their own families. This created family supports each other economically, socially, and emotionally. House families compete in Balls that allow them to express themselves in unique and creative ways through dance, especially Vogue dance. Red Ribbon Rumble, a monthly program, also involves discussion on current issues as well as HIV and STD prevention and treatment.

## **Program Planning**

Planning any successful program at the Indiana Historical Society requires three things: the consideration of audience, intentional storytelling, and organization. Each of these elements allows for a program that successfully interprets history and conveys that history to the audience in an entertaining and engaging way. The Public Programs department at the Indiana Historical Society aims to extract diverse and interesting stories from the vast paper-based collection and develop programs that allow a greater audience to engage with this history. For Dragtivism, the Indiana Historical Society's collection held some information about several Indianapolis based LGBTQ organizations, including the Bag Ladies and Low Pone. It is clear that the gaps in the collection include transpeople, queer people, and people of color in the LGBTQ communities. A portion of this program was dedicated to letting people know that the Indiana Historical Society is actively collecting LGBTQ history from people all over the state.

When considering audience, we had to be deliberate about who we were targeting. When a program aims at focusing on a specific audience, rather than the general public or all audiences, it is more successful at conveying the intended message or narrative because it is easier to pinpoint what that particular audience needs, values, and wants to learn. For Dragtivism, my intended audience was people over 15 years old who were interested in learning more about the drag elements of the LGBTQ communities as well as current members of the partner organizations. The intended audience would range from people who could be somewhat familiar with some elements of Indiana drag to those who were completely unfamiliar. The Indiana Historical Society's building

provided a familiar ground where people who did not know where to get introduced to drag or the LGBTQ community could feel welcome to learn more.

Intentional storytelling is critical to telling an inclusive story about Indiana's drag history. When selecting which organizations to partner with, I intentionally worked with extremely diverse groups that focus on different messaging and represent the wide variety of drag in Indiana. During the development of this program, I was challenged to expand my own thinking on what the Indianapolis drag community was. Early in the planning process, it was brought to my attention that I needed to include drag organizations that performed outside of the traditional drag performance. Intentionally working with diverse groups tells a larger narrative and opens up a larger discussion of what "drag" means to different members of the LGBTQ communities. The Bag Ladies represent the gay white male perspective while Low Pone actively represents the queer and more subversive portion, that which is moving away from traditional representations of gender and drag of the LGBTQ communities. The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence focuses on messaging of love and acceptance in a group that accepts all members of the LGBTQ communities. Brothers United represents the Black and Latinx members of the LGBTQ communities. Each of these organizations tells a different narrative of being a member of the LGBTQ communities in Indiana and together they demonstrate how diverse the community is.

Institutional support was crucial to the success of this event and to the diversity within the intentional storytelling. The Indiana Historical Society's support meant that these organizations would be welcomed to the space and it demonstrates the Historical Society's recognition of the importance of LGBTQ history. A space like the Indiana Historical Society, which traditionally is perceived as a heterosexual space, opened up its

doors to the homosexual and queer communities. This move to create space for LGBTQ people and history is possible through deep institutional support for LGBTQ organizations as well as community building outside of the Historical Society itself. For this event, personal community connections fostered a positive relationship between the Historical Society and each of the three participating organizations. Each organization was made to feel personally welcomed and supported by a deep connection they had with a Historical Society staff member or experience. In addition, knowing they would be working with other LGBTQ organizations, each felt more comfortable to trust the intentions of the Historical Society. The Historical Society became a safe space for both the LGBTQ communities because of the trust fostered in community connections and for the audience members who were unfamiliar with the partner organizations but wanted to learn through the lens of the Historical Society.

Organization is key when implementing any successful program, but especially a program that involves so many partner organizations. First, I had to strategically pick a date that would work for the Indiana Historical Society, but also for our partner organizations. Because all of these organizations would be involved in Indy Pride, we opted for a date that followed that big event, knowing that the partner organizations would be busy planning for it. We chose a date close to Pride so that people who were still energized by Pride and by June as Pride month would be excited to come to our program.

The next step was determining how the event space would be set up. The special events staff at the Indiana Historical Society was helpful and assisted in creating a cabaret style set up with a stage, tables and chairs for guests, and a bar. This seating style made



the evening more relaxed and have more of a “bar” feel. It allowed performers to move around the space and interact with the audience. It was important for performers to interact with the audience as a way to more deeply connect with them, but to also create a more social atmosphere.

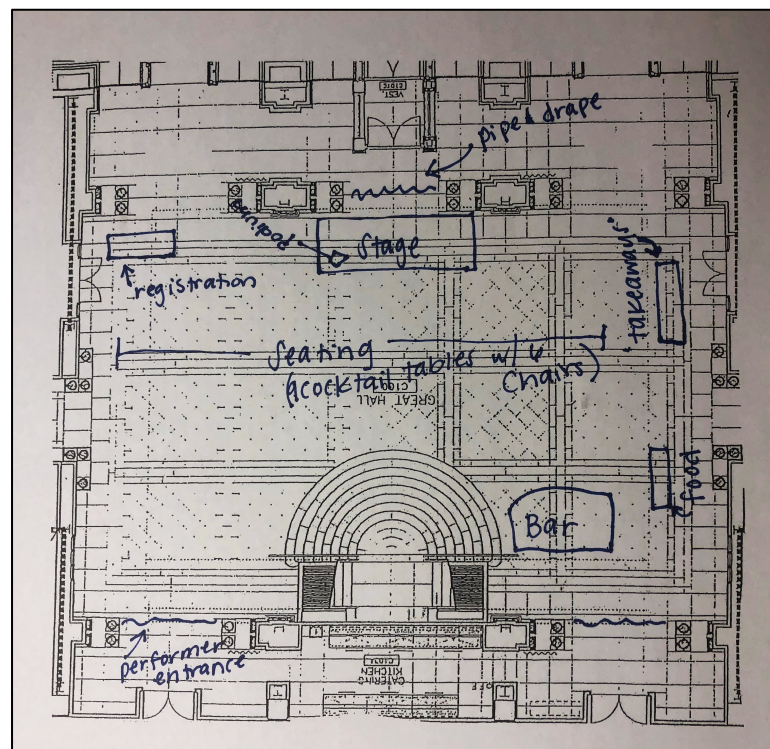


Figure 5.2 – A schematic plan was created to determine the set up for the evening. This included a stage, audience space, and a bar. Indiana Historical Society Lilly Hall Set- Up, Dragtivism, Created by author.

The evening was outlined to give each group the same amount of time to present themselves. As an event at a history center, I wanted each organization to share their own histories and their personal missions. It was important for these active groups to talk to the audience about their experiences in the Indiana LGBTQ communities because each has a different perspective and different passions. They spoke about what was important to them and what inspired them to form their respective organization. Following a brief

introduction and history by each group, they were given the freedom to perform in the way that best represented what their organizations do.

Low Pone was on stage first. Carrie Keel, founder of Low Pone spoke about how they wanted to create a space for queer individuals to gather, especially in the face of so many LGBTQ bars and gathering spaces closing. They then discussed how, since their founding, they have added additional programming to give younger queer individuals a space to gather before they are able to go to bars. These additional programs include BUZZ/Cut and Minor Sweat. Following Carrie's introduction, three of Low Pone's performers individually danced and lip-synced.<sup>157</sup> These performers were Mary Fagdalene, one of the original performers, Sleazy Nicks, and Lady Dumpster.



Figure 5.3 – (Left to Right) Lady Dumpster, Taylor Rose, Mary Fagdalene, Low Pone founder, Carrie Keel, and Sleazy Nicks pose at the Indiana Historical Society. Low Pone Performers, Image taken by author.

---

<sup>157</sup> Nicole Pasulka, "Read My Lips," Slate, June 17, 2019. Lip-syncing is a long tradition in drag performances. Performers mimic the singer while executing the best choreography, costuming, and makeup.

Next on stage was the Bag Ladies who were represented by Queen Mother Blossom, Sparkle Nightly, 2019 Bag Lady Queen June Taylor, and Tonya Campesi. Sparkle Nightly, who is currently serving as Bag Lady coordinator, introduced the group and spoke of their history in Indianapolis and with AIDS. The group then danced to “We Are Family” and got the crowd to dance along.



Figure 5.4 – (Left to Right) Bag Ladies June Taylor, Sparkle Nightly, Queen Mother Blossom, and Tonya Campesi take center stage at the Indiana Historical Society During “Dragtivism.” Bag Ladies Performers, Image taken by author.

The final group to perform was the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence who spoke of what it means to be a sister. Three founding members, Sister Griselda Glitterbox, Sister Pantastic X Perience, and Sister Geisha then blessed the room with one of their trademark blessings that mark the location as a safe queer space. They finished their time on stage with a lip-sync to “I Will Follow You” from the movie *Sister Act*.



Figure 5.5 – (Left to Right) Sister Griselda Glitterbox, Sister Geisha, and Sister Pantastic X Perience begin their performance of “I Will Follow You.” Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence Performers, Image taken by author.

To close out the evening, Jordan Ryan from the Indiana Historical Society’s Archives and Special Collections department did a call for collections. Here, they expressed the importance of collecting all LGBTQ history and how scholars can only know about the communities when they have materials that tell the full narrative.

To connect history to the program, I created “audience takeaways” which are small cards that shared a more in-depth history about each organization and how audience members could learn more. These cards featured one photo from the organization and a few paragraphs about their founding and missions. In addition, to encourage the audience to learn more about each organization following the evening’s events, each card contained a “learn more” section that had additional collection or scholarly material. These cards were placed on a central table surrounded by images from

each organization. Drag is a very visual culture, so it was important to show the audience what each organization has done in the past.



# LOW PONE



COURTESY OF LOW PONE

Low Pone is a night of drag, dancing, and music to celebrate the queer communities in Indianapolis. They aim to reunite and re-engage the queer communities through creativity and individuality in spaces that everyone can feel welcome and comfortable. The organization began in February 2017 with a once-a-month queer dance party at Pioneer in Fountain Square. The event is hosted by drag queens Mary Fagdalane and Stevie Dicks.

Low Pone was founded by Carrie Keel who'd seen pop-up queer dance parties in other cities and decided to create one in Indianapolis. Keel had noted two local drag queens, Mary Fagdalane and Auntie Christ, who performed a different style of drag that did not fit into the traditional drag performed in Indianapolis. Keel invited them to become the first hosts of Low Pone to provide a space for nontraditional drag performers.

The organization brings in performers from all over the country, especially those known for being subversive in the drag community.

Low Pone has expanded beyond their once-a-month party to include programs such as a book-length photo and essay project titled "Crashing Through the Front Door," an all-ages event series called Minor Sweat, and the BUZZ/cut music festival. The organization has thrived since its recent founding but have kept true to the mission of providing a space for all members of the queer community.

## LEARN MORE

- "Low Pone Does Drag Differently," Seth Johnson, NUVO, Jan. 16, 2019.
- Crashing Through the Front Door Collection, Indiana Historical Society

# THE SISTERS OF PERPETUAL INDULGENCE



COURTESY OF THE SISTERS OF PERPETUAL INDULGENCE

The Sisters began their mission to “promulgate universal joy and expiate stigmatic guilt” in the fall of 1979 after attending the first International Faerie gathering in San Francisco. Their founders, Sister Vicious PHB, Reverend Mother, Sister Missionary Position and Sister Hysterectoria, donned full, traditional habits to challenge conformity. Their signature Flemish 14th-century habits and white face gained instant recognition.

By 1981, sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS were spreading in the city, creating fear and panic. Two of the Sisters were also registered nurses, Sister Roz Ereption and Sister Florence Nightmare. They used their dual identities to create *Play Fair!* – the first safer sex pamphlet created in the world. It provided helpful advice and humor to encourage gay men to reduce risk and prevent disease transmission.

Today, there are 65 houses across the world each with their own habits, cultures and rules that reflect their community. The Indiana Crossroads Sisters began in 2014 by Sister Nova Aggra and the organization has flourished since. They have devoted themselves to community service and outreach to those on the edges of society, promoting human rights, respecting diversity and spiritual enlightenment.

## LEARN MORE

- *Queer Nuns: Religion, Activism, and Serious Parody* by Melissa M. Wilcox
- The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, [www.thesisters.org](http://www.thesisters.org)



# THE BAG LADIES

The Bag Ladies began as a fun bus tour of local gay bars in October 1981, bringing men from the Indianapolis gay community together. Coby Palmer, Ed Walsh and Gary Johnson led the group on the tour dressed in "camp" drag. The "ladies" toted large bags filled with costume changes as they hopped on and off three large charter busses.

That year, AIDS was killing people fast and gay men were among the first to be diagnosed, creating a lasting connection between it and the gay community. Palmer and other Bag Ladies decided to create a "frontal assault on 'the plague.'" In October 1982, they turned the bus tour into a major fundraising opportunity. In addition to their bags of costumes, participants also carried empty bags to collect donations to build a "war chest" for the future.

In their 38-year history, the Bag Ladies have raised more than \$1 million for AIDS and LGBTQ+ charities. They have also played their part in the creation of several different AIDS-related programs in Indianapolis including the Buddy House, the Buddy Program, the Damien Center and Nurse Safe Sexx. They continue to raise money and awareness about issues in the LGBT communities.



COURTESY OF THE BAG LADIES

## LEARN MORE

- Michael Bohr Collection of the Indy Pride Chris Gonzalez Library and Archives, circa 1960s to 2016, Indiana Historical Society
- Indy Pride Bag Ladies Materials, circa 1977 to 2015, Indiana Historical Society
- Coby Palmer Oral History, Indiana Historical Society
- Edmond Talucci Oral History, Indiana Historical Society

Figure 5.6 – A one-page takeaway was designed for each of the partner organizations. This allowed audience members to have a more concrete set of information about each group as well as suggestions on where to learn more. Dragtivism Audience Takeaways Created by author.



## **Post-Program Reviews**

Upon reflection, one of the major elements missing from Dragtivism was an introduction to drag for people who were unfamiliar with this type of performance. For audience members who were not members of one of the partner organizations, a brief history of drag, why drag is performed, and who performs drag would have made them more comfortable and would have put the performances and histories of the partner organizations into context.

Following Dragtivism, I received positive feedback from both audience members and our partner organizations. For the evening, we hosted 80 guests that included individuals who were already familiar with one of the three partner organizations and individuals who were unfamiliar with any of the drag organizations but were eager to learn more about them and the topic of drag. We sent out evaluations to the guests allowing them to share their thoughts on the evening. Many were excited to see that the Indiana Historical Society was hosting programs that represented the LGBTQ communities and were actively collecting LGBTQ history. Others mentioned their excitement to see three distinct organizations on the same stage. We also asked how likely audience members would be to recommend the Indiana Historical Society to others. This is called a Net Promoter Score which can tell how likely people are to return to your organization or tell other people about it. For this program, we received a 100/100 Net Promoter Score meaning that the audience truly enjoyed the program and would come back to see more programs like this one.

The Indiana Historical Society received extremely positive feedback from our partner organizations. They were impressed that the Indiana Historical Society was

hosting a program like Dragtivism and honored to be a part of the evening. Many of them were also excited for the opportunity to work with the other organizations because they do not often have that opportunity. Altogether, Dragtivism was a success as a demonstration of the drag and LGBTQ communities in Indiana.

## **CONCLUSION - THE LASTING LEGACY OF THE BAG LADIES**

Between 1981-1995, an era of uncertainty, fear, and oppression, gay men around the country came together to fight a new disease. AIDS quickly became a stigmatized disease because of its connection to the gay community. Gay men were among the first to contract AIDS. With the rise of the religious right and other conservative social and political factions, AIDS became a pillar to stand on as these groups denounced the “homosexual lifestyle.” Harsh critics of the gay community saw AIDS as a punishment from God and saw the disease as something the gay community brought upon itself. Gay men had little recourse as AIDS began killing people quickly and there were no medications to stop or slow the disease. End of life care was one of the only services that could be provided during the early years of the AIDS crisis and the promotion of safe sex was the only method of limiting transmission and protecting uninfected individuals.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the Bag Ladies placed themselves at the center of the Indianapolis fight against AIDS through their services of education and end of life care for people with AIDS. They were able to build community through drag performances, develop engaging educational programming for the communities they were working with, and create a network of allies to help them in their fight including secular and religious organizations in response to the national AIDS crisis. This thesis aims at cultivating a deeper understanding of AIDS activism in Indianapolis. Through this study of the Bag Ladies, I have demonstrated how they were able to provide direct service to people with AIDS through hands-on care and fundraising. Understanding what drove the founders to focus on a direct service approach to AIDS treatment opens an analysis of what the gay communities as well as those with AIDS were facing in Indianapolis.

The Bag Ladies saw a need in their community and sprung to action. Before AIDS appeared in Indianapolis, the Bag Ladies began collecting money to send to the Gay Men's Health Crisis in New York but knew they were not immune. As AIDS made its way to Indianapolis, the Bag Ladies began to do more than raise money. They were able to change the face of medical intervention for the prevention and treatment of AIDS in Indianapolis. Through their initiation of programs such as the Buddy Program and Buddy House, they were able to provide direct care to people with AIDS by pairing them with community members willing to help, providing housing, or getting them connected to care. The opening of the Damien Center established an official organization dedicated to connecting people with AIDS to care and providing educational resources for the Indianapolis community. Safe sex campaigns were popular all over the United States and proved to be crucial in the fight against AIDS. Nurse Safe Sexx provided a fun and educational way to reach the gay community in Indianapolis. Although safe sex campaigns were met with hostility from within and outside of the gay community, the impact of Nurse Safe Sexx was wide reaching.

Creating these programs and organizations allowed people with AIDS living in Indianapolis to get the help they needed that would not have been received from other organizations. The Bag Ladies continue their efforts in Indianapolis and are celebrating 38 years in 2019. Since their initial bus tour, the Bag Ladies have raised over \$1 million for the Gregory Powers Direct Emergency Financial Assistance Fund sponsored by the

Health Foundation. “It wasn’t our goal to do all this,” said Ed Walsh in an interview with *The Indianapolis News*, “but something had to be done, so we did it.”<sup>158</sup>

Similar to the Bag Ladies, other organizations in Indianapolis have used drag to promote their activist missions and create safe spaces for members of the LGBTQ communities. Organizations like the Bag Ladies and Low Pone have seen a need in their communities and filled those needs by taking ideas from other organizations throughout the country and modifying them for Indianapolis. The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence Indiana Chapter expanded the legacy of a national organization to Indiana and have continued the larger mission of spreading love and joy to LGBTQ people. The Indiana Historical Society hosted Dragtivism as a way to introduce these activist organizations to a larger public that desired to learn more about the diversity of the Indianapolis LGBTQ drag community. Indiana Historical Society’s continuing initiative to collect and preserve LGBTQ history provides access to materials that allows a deeper understanding of the history. The Bag Ladies have a continuing positive impact on the Indianapolis community and they are not alone.

---

<sup>158</sup> Janet Hastings, “Damien Center place for help, comfort,” *Indianapolis News* (Indianapolis, IN), Feb. 9, 1988.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### *Primary Sources*

#### **Manuscript Collections and Unpublished Works**

Catholic Archdiocese of Indianapolis Archives.

Mark A. Lee LGBT Collection 1981-2014, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis.

The Gay Men's Health Crisis Collection, Cooper Hewitt Archive.

#### **Periodicals**

*The Atlantic*

*Catholic New York*

*The Evening Times*

*Greenwich Village Society for Historic Preservation Blog*

*Indianapolis Monthly*

*Indianapolis News*

*The Indianapolis New Times*

*The Indianapolis Star*

*The Mirror*

*Muncie Star*

*New York Daily News*

*New York Times*

*New Works News*

*Origins: CNS Documentary Service*

*The Post-Star*

*SFGate*

*Slate*

### **Government Documents**

“Achievements in Public Health: Reduction in Perinatal Transmission of HIV Infection,” *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*, Centers for Disease Control, June 2, 2006.; *The Social Impact of AIDS in the United States*, (Washington D.C.: National Research Council, 1993).

C. Everett Koop, “Understanding AIDS: Surgeon General’s Report on AIDS,” U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, October 22, 1986.

“Content of AIDS- Related Written Materials, Pictorials, Audiovisuals, Questionnaires, Survey Instruments, and Educational Sessions in Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Assistance Programs” Centers for Disease Control, 1992.

Gay Men’s Health Crisis v. Sullivan, 733 F. Supp. 619, JUSTIA US Law, 1989.

“H.R. 3058 – 100<sup>th</sup> Congress: Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services and Education and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 1988,” Congress.gov, 2018, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/100th-congress/house-bill/3058>.

“Pneumocystis Pneumonia – Los Angeles,” *CDC Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 30, no. 21 (June 5, 1981).

### **Published Material**

The Advisory Committee of the People with AIDS, “The Denver Principles,” 1983.

Humanae Vitae, A Letter from Pope Paul VI to the Catholic Church Regarding Procreation, 25 July 1968.

The Picture: A Needs Assessment and Overview of the Indiana HIV/AIDS Arena (Indianapolis: The Indiana AIDS Fund, 1996).

### **Oral Histories**

Coby Palmer Oral History and Transcript, 2015, SC 3442, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, 19.

Coby Palmer Oral History, interview by Kara Chinn, 2019.

Edmond Talucci Oral History Interview and Transcript, 2014, SC 3338, Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, 13-14.

Edmond Talucci Oral History, interview by Kara Chinn, 2019.

Kenn King, interview by Kara Chinn, 2019.

## Secondary Sources

### Books

Allen, Peter Lewis. *The Wages of Sin: Sex and Disease, Past and Present*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

Batza, Katie. *Before AIDS: Gay Health Politics in the 1970s*. Philadelphia, University of Philadelphia Press, 2018.

D'Emilio, John. *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983.

Gould, Deborah B. *Moving Politics: Emotion and ACT UP's Fight against AIDS*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.

Petro, Anthony M. *After the Wrath of God: AIDS, Sexuality, and American Religion*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Wilcox, Melissa M. *Queer Nuns*. New York: New York University Press, 2018.

Williams, Daniel K. *God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

### Articles and Chapters

Blair, Thomas R. "Safe Sex in the 1970s: Community Practitioners on the Eve of AIDS," *American Journal of Public Health* 107, no. 6 (June 2017): 872-879.

Conrad, Peter "The Social Meaning of AIDS." *Social Policy* 17, no. 1 (Summer 1986): 52.

Fee, Elizabeth and Nancy Krieger, "The Emerging Histories of AIDS: Three Successive Paradigms." *History and Philosophy of the Life Sciences* 15, no. 3 (1993): 460-463.

Fuks, Abraham. "The Military Metaphors of Modern Medicine." *Semantic Scholar* (2009): 1-8.

Haverkos M.D., Harry W. and James W. Curran M.D., M.P.H. "The Current Outbreak of Kaposi's Sarcoma and Opportunistic Infections." *CA: A Cancer Journal for Clinicians* 32 (1982): 330-339.

McVicar, Michael J. "The Religious Right in America." *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* (March 2016).

Patton, Cindy. "Safe Sex/Save Lives: Evolving Modes of Activism." In *AIDS, Drugs and Prevention*, ed. Tim Rhodes. Milton Park: Taylor and Frances Ltd, 1996.



## Websites

“Bag Lady Queens.” The Bag Ladies. 2018. <http://bagladiesindy.org/who-we-are/the-queens/bag-lady-queens/>.

“The First AIDS Drugs.” National Cancer Institute: Center for Cancer Research. [ccr.cancer.org/news/landmarks/article/first-aids-drugs](http://ccr.cancer.org/news/landmarks/article/first-aids-drugs).

“F8 Gene: Coagulation factor VIII.” U.S. National Library of Medicine. 2010. <https://ghr.nlm.nih.gov/gene/F8#conditions>.

“GMHC/ HIV/AIDS Timeline.” Gay Men’s Health Crisis. 2018. <http://www.gmhc.org/about-us/gmhchivaids-timeline>.

“Understanding Drag.” National Center for Transgender Equality. April 28, 2017. <https://transequality.org/issues/resources/understanding-drag>.

“History.” The Bag Ladies. 2018. <http://bagladiesindy.org/who-we-are/history/>.

“HIV/ AIDS Emergency Assistance.” The Health Foundation of Greater Indianapolis, Inc. 2018. <https://thfgi.org/funding-priorities/hivaids-emergency-assistance/>.

Hughson, Greta. “Factsheet: CD4 Cell Counts.” Aidsmap. 2017. [www.aidsmap.com/CD4-cell-counts/page/1044596/](http://www.aidsmap.com/CD4-cell-counts/page/1044596/).

Nall, Rachel. “The History of HIV and AIDS in the United States.” *Healthline*. January 29, 2018. [www.healthline.com/health/hiv-aids/history#1990s-2000s](http://www.healthline.com/health/hiv-aids/history#1990s-2000s).

“Who was Ryan White?” Heath Resources and Services Administration. 2016. <https://hab.hrsa.gov/about-ryan-white-hivaids-program/who-was-ryan-white>.

## **CURRICULUM VITAE**

**Kara Elizabeth Chinn**

### **EDUCATION**

M.A. History, Indiana University at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis,  
2020

B.A. History, Purdue University, 2016  
Minor: Art History

### **PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE**

Digital Image Curator, Digital Encyclopedia of Indianapolis at the Polis Center, 2019-Present

Collections Assistant, Indiana Historical Society, 2019- Present

Public Programs Specialist, Indiana Historical Society, 2018-2019

Tour Guide and Education Specialist, Indiana Statehouse Tour Office, 2017-2018

Archive Intern, Indiana Historical Society, 2016

Tour Guide, Moody Mansion: Historic Site, 2015

Curatorial Intern, Galveston Railroad Museum, 2015

### **PROFESSIONAL ORGANIZATIONS**

Graduate Student Association, Member, 2017-2019